

## Looking Back:

# Mitchell's Department Store Fire in Sanford

**B**illy Ray Faircloth was an aggressive "fireman's fireman," and his bravery and dedication were never questioned at the Sanford Fire Department. He could be counted on to find the fire and extinguish it. Sadly, on March 14, 1980, Faircloth died while fighting a fire in the basement of Mitchell's Department Store in Sanford.

Faircloth was off-duty when he responded to the call — his loyalty made it impossible to stay home, away from what began as a typical structure fire at Mitchell's. Accounts from those on the scene tell of a "normal" incident that went bad, very quickly.

To understand how and why the fire escalated so quickly, it's necessary to understand the interior layout of Mitchell's. The store consisted of a maze of aisles that often left children separated from their parents while shopping. So confusing

were the aisles, that many longtime Sanford residents would attest to having been "lost" in the store during their childhood. Another factor of the fire's severity was the sheer volume of merchandise inside.

The front entrance area initially had only light smoke upon entry. Faircloth separated from the hose line and became lost in the basement while searching for the seat of the fire. Although, valiant efforts were made to locate him — firefighters "held the stairs" to provide an exit until exit orders were issued. Many of the firefighters' bunker gear was smoking from the excessive heat and their helmets were too hot to touch with a bare hand when they first emerged from the structure. Sadly, Faircloth succumbed to the smoke after his SCBA ran out of air. The "routine" fire became the worst fire in the department's history.

### Parking Lot or Memorial?

We should have done this or we should have done that; questions and second-guessing usually linger after the tragic fact. Monday morning quarterbacking could save a lot of lives but the fire and rescue service doesn't have that option. Sometimes things happen that we can't foresee.

In this case, a chance to start from the beginning wouldn't necessarily have changed the outcome in 1980. Without the luxury of knowing the outcome in advance, the Sanford firefighters just did their job the way it was done in the 1970s and early 1980s. Fire departments had a limited number of SCBAs, and they were used sparingly to prevent having to refill them. Somewhat controlled free-lancing was the way the Sanford Fire Department operated. There was little accountability, no formal staging and rehab was

being taken by ambulance to the hospital. There were no PASS devices or thermal imagers, and walkie-talkies were limited in number and function. Positive Pressure Ventilation was unheard of in 1980, and incident command was informal at best.

The chief was certainly in charge and, for the most part, called all the shots, but individual companies sometimes performed independently when an incident escalated. Sanford firefighters got the job done because they were aggressive and did the job without the formalities of today. However, there were needless injuries and deaths of firefighters during those days. No building is worth the serious injury or death of one of our own.

Many little things could have helped change the circumstances and outcome on the night in Sanford on March 14, 1980. New technologies and tactics would certainly make a difference today.



Perhaps the most important improvements are use of the Incident Command System, Accountability, PASS devices and RIT teams.

When a building burns to the ground, what makes the difference between creating a parking lot or a memorial site? Veteran firefighters and officers worth their salt will agree that sometimes it's the small things — be it pure luck or the knowledge and skills of those involved — that make the difference. Many veterans of the fire service can retell stories of close calls with happy endings.

By sticking to the basics in training and on the scene of an incident, the odds for a positive outcome are increased, but by no means do we always dictate that the outcome will be good. Of course a good outcome means that everyone goes home at the end of the day. The basics are rescue, evacuation, ventilation, attack (offensive or defensive) and salvage. The order or extent to which we perform these basic tasks varies according to the incident. On some calls they are done simultaneously; others don't require every task to be performed.

We should all be willing to learn from past incidents and utilize new technologies to prevent harm to ourselves while protecting the lives and properties of our "customers." I read the reports and recommendations that follow most incidents involving firefighter fatalities and think to myself, "There, but for the Grace of God, go I."

The circumstances surrounding most Line of Duty Deaths, when we look back at them, sometimes seem easy to recognize and fix: Think before you start throwing darts at someone else; In the heat of the moment, could you have done some of the same things in the same ways?; How many different firefighters or officers could have caused a change in the outcome in a myriad of tragic firefighter fatalities by taking another course of action at the right time?

Sadly, the fire service continues to repeat many of the same mistakes. The fire service averages 100 Line of Duty Deaths each year, but only a fraction of these are unavoidable tragic occurrences. Others are needless and could have been prevented. We need to train like we mean it, and then perform like we



train. Somewhere in the United States in the next week or month, chances are there will be a Line of Duty Death. Will it involve your department or someone you know? Remember this — if nothing else — it's often small differences that can make the difference between parking lots and memorials.

#### ***About the Sanford Fire Department***

The Sanford Fire Department was proudly organized around 1903 with 16 volunteer members and a hand-pulled hose reel. Sometime between 1903 and 1907, the volunteers acquired a horse to pull the hose reel — the horse also worked with the street department and, in the event of a fire she would reportedly return to the fire station on her own accord. In 1907, the Sanford Fire Department added a hose wagon and a second horse.

The first motorized fire engine was a 1917 American LaFrance. This 1917 engine was on static display at the Railroad House Museum during the 1970s and is now in storage in Lee County awaiting someone to champion its restoration. The second truck, dubbed "Old Betsy," was delivered by train in March 1926, and

is kept in pumping condition.

The first full-time paid Fire Chief was long time volunteer Chief J.O. Bridges. Chief Bridges was appointed in 1962 and served until 1975, with a total of 46 years in the fire service when the City's policy dictated that he retire because of his age. Assistant Chief Sam Bost was

promoted to chief and served until his retirement in December 1988. Floyd Caviness took over in 1989 and served as chief until his retirement in 1995. Chief T. Wayne Barber has been in the role ever since.

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