

# *ORANGE PEEL*

*April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2006*

BY: BILLY LEWIS

Sacramento Fire Department

## **REMEMBER**

I remember the first time I walked into a fire station. It was about a week after I had burned down our backyard. Fourth grade on mother's day. I had been playing with matches in the back yard...playing "Fireman". I called 911...but had the fire out by the time the fire engine showed up. Looking back I guess you can say that was my first fire.

A week later I found myself with my Pops, walking into the Firehouse...to be educated (actually back then it was more "Let's scare the hell out of this kid"). I remember the Captain showing me pictures of fires and telling me that "Those fires were started by kids playing with matches" and how the family barely made it out of the house. Of course now I know they were full of it. I also remember that there was a call while I was there. I remember all those guys running out the firehouse to the rescue truck.... someone was having a heart attack I was told. I also remember leaving thinking "Cool".

I remember I was in high school; I was coming home from my girlfriend's house I noticed a fire. It was in a small business right along side the highway. I pulled over and used a pay phone (remember those?) and called 911. Not to long after, a fire engine pulled up. Off came the fire hose, with a short bust of water the fire was out. The firefighters then pulled out a burned up mattress. After answering some questions from the Chief I went home. I also remember leaving thinking "Cool".

I remember right after high school when I was working at the grocery store bagging groceries, the "Paid Firefighters" from the "City Fire Department", coming in to do their shopping. I remember their pagers going off, and watching them run off leaving their food where it sat. And boy do I remember the sound of that "grinder" wailing as they left. I remember the day when my buddy who I worked with came by the store to show me all his "fire gear", because he just got on as a volunteer with his local fire department. I remember how neat it all looked, the helmet, coat, pants, boots, and pager.

I remember the feeling I got when I thought about how really cool it would be to be a fireman.

Like it was yesterday I remember, almost ten years after I had gone into the "Firehouse" for the first time (for education), asking the Captain that was there how I go about becoming a fireman. A week later after paperwork and a physical I remember getting all my gear, all black, that way people would know that I was new.

I also remember trying to explain to the Captain that my buddies pants and boots were different. I remember the look on his face when I told him that “Bob’s pants and boots are connected” unlike the separate pants and boots that I got. I also remember how silly I felt when he explained that you place the boots in the bunkers then push the pants down around the boots. A day later I remember the very first call I got to go on. It was at my old high school for a knee injury. I still can remember how my face hurt, because of the smile that was on it due to going code three. When we got there I remember my Captain turning to the back seat and telling me to “Grab the bag!” Next to me on the seat was “the bag”, I grabbed it and followed the Captain, driver, and another volunteer firefighter into the gym where the patient was. I can never forget the embarrassing feeling I felt when the Captain looked at me holding “the bag” with bewilderment on his face, then asking me “Why in the hell did you bring in my turnout bag?” I can remember that from that day on I never mistook on which bag to bring in. I also remember, that is how we learn, though mistakes. This is also when I learned about the ribbing you take from other firefighters when you screw up. Yes, I still hear about that call today, almost fourteen years later.

It was going to take about a week for me to get my pager, so I was given an old 10-10. Remember those? I sure as hell remember the first time that it went off in the middle of the night. I can’t really remember how high I jumped out of bed, but I’m sure it was pretty high. I do remember how proud I was when I did get my pager. It was one of the old, big Motorola’s. My buddies gave me a hard time, because it looked like a big old garage door opener on my hip, but I was still proud.

What about your first fire? Remember that? I do. I had been on about three months when we got a house to burn down for a “control burn”. Myself, the Captain, and another Firefighter were about the fourth crew to go in. I remember how the Captain tried to explain the stages of fire, and what the fire was going to do. I can recall the Captain telling me why we were using a solid stream and where to direct the stream...but what I really remember is thinking “Holy crap this is so F\*%#in Cool”! There was some standing water on the floor, I remember how the water was burning my knees, then I would try to stand up a little, and from outside the building I remember the Chief screaming at me to “Get down”! Now I know that a control burn really doesn’t count as your first fire...but at that time I really didn’t give a damn and still don’t today. Fire is fire. I remember that night how pumped I was telling my folks about it. I remember thinking how “This is the job for me”.

Over the next year I can remember a lot of “firsts”. Like my first...ok, real fire, dead person, CPR, first time I got to drive the fire engine back from a call, real big grass fire...a lot of first’s...and I remember them all.

I remember when I got accepted into the fire academy at Butte College, man how proud was I. I remember meeting Chief Larry McBride, he taught us ladders and auto extrication. I sure some of you out there remember him. I remember thinking, “So this is what a Fireman looks like” I will never forget him telling our class at our graduation this. “The day you think you’ve learned everything there is to know about being a firefighter is the day you need to retire”

Over the next four or five years there were even more first's

Fire job interview for a seasonal firefighter job.

Strike team.

Firehouse meal I made

Real big house fire...real big!

Going to a school for fire safety (showing kids the fire truck)

Picture in the paper

Ice cream I had to buy for the picture being in the paper

Job with a local ambulance company

First crashed ambulance

Second crashed ambulance

Baby I helped delivery

And then...First full time fire job!!!

I got a job with the same Fire department that I would see come into the store to do their shopping. I remember when I got off the phone with the Chief, after I had accepted the job offer how high I jumped and how loud I screamed in excitement.

Over the almost five years that I worked for that fire department there even more firsts that I experienced. I remember the first fatal fire that I went on, the first river rescue while on the swift water rescue team (ok recovery). There were a lot of new experiences that I got to see and do, some of them good and some of them bad as I recall. I look back and recall the first time I heard Firefighters do what sometimes we do best. Bitching at the kitchen table. I can recall how over time how I too began to bitch and complain about this and that. I remember when my mind became clouded with politics and I began to gripe and complain. I remember still loving the job though.

I look back at 1992 when I first walk into that firehouse to see about becoming a volunteer so I could one day be a full time firefighter. Now I look at myself today almost fourteen years later working for what I consider one of the best fire departments in the country. I remember at one point of my career saying, "Wow I sure have learned a lot", then when I got hired here with Sacramento City Fire Department saying, "Wow I have so much more to learn". It's hard to put into words the amount of talent, experience, and knowledge that surrounds us each day that we are at work, it really is amazing.

Over the past year my department has certainly taken it's share of hits. The bad press, and well, some more bad press, a contract that didn't go as well as we had hoped for, but worst of all the passing of a brother Firefighter. It's easy to see why the morale would be at an all time low. I think at times this job is hard enough on the body and mind without having to include the above mentioned. Every now and then though, something happens to you that brings' everything about this job back into perspective.

For me that one thing happened about two or so weeks ago. I was on my way home when I decided to swing into one of the fire stations that I had volunteered at so many years ago. As I pulled up I recognized one of the paid guys there, who used to be a volunteer firefighter with me back in the day. Two “kids”, who were in uniform, uniforms that looked two sizes to big for them, greeted me. I introduced myself to them. The paid guy there told them that I was once a volunteer there and now works for Sac City fire. They were cleaning up after doing some rope training, so I took the opportunity to show them something new that I had just recently learned using ropes. These two “kids” were new volunteers, and one was actually the seasonal firefighter there as well. Well as the “shop talk” went on, and three hours had past, I couldn’t help but notice how these new guys were soaking up all the “talk’ that was being handed out. As we talked, it clicked, these two new guys were me, almost fourteen years ago. And then I remembered...I remembered was I was here.

I was reminded why I was here because of the look in these new guys eyes. The look of desire to be where I’m at, the look of hope that they will one day be at where I am now, the look of excitement for the job, and the willingness to learn. Why were they there? They were there for the same reasons I was there fourteen years ago, because they wanted to be Firemen. They were there because they knew the job was fun, exciting, cool, and they like to help people. They were there for the same simple reasons we were all there once upon a time. Why am I here today? Simply put...for the love of the job!

I can say that I really never forgot why I am here, but it took two “new guys” to really set back in stone for me. I love being a firefighter...and I’m proud of being one. Even after my 7<sup>th</sup> call after midnight. More so I love being a Firefighter for the Sacramento Fire Department...and am proud of that as well. I love our history, tradition, our values, and my brothers and sisters of this department. Sometimes we may not always get what we want or we may even have things taken from us, but one thing that can never be taken is the love of the job and our pride.

So does what I wrote make me perfect? Does it make me a happy go lucky guy every single day of my life? Absolutely not!! After all I am human. Are there days that I shake my head in frustration and disbelief. Yes, I do. Are there days that I get caught up in the bitch sessions at the kitchen table? Yep I do. I’m sure at one time or the other we all do.

So what keeps me going? I simply try to Remember. I try to remember why I really got into this job in the first place, or all the reasons I love this job. I think about all the brothers who have made the ultimate sacrifice. I think about all of the young kids out there today who right now has the dream to one day be a firefighter.

So my one question to you is...do you remember?

Keep the faith my brothers, Keep the Faith