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Solomons Volunteers A Family on Call

Solomons Volunteer Rescue

Serving the Southern Calvert

By Dick Myers
Editor

Although “Volunteer” is their middle name, it could just as easily be “community.” Thus it was that members of the Solomons Volunteer Rescue Squad & Fire Department (SVRS&FD) showed up at Cove Point Park on a Sunday morning (April 7) to help celebrate the opening of the 50th season for the Calvert County American Little League.

They arrived in their hook and ladder truck and several other apparatuses. Members hoisted up onto the hook and ladder a large American flag to hang over the starting line of the parade scheduled for the occasion.

And then the call came in. There was a fire at the Appeal Landfill nearby. The members pulled down the flag and off they went to respond to the call. It was a perfect example, indeed a metaphor for what they do – always on call for the community.

The department as we know it today got its start on January 1, 1955 as the Calvert County Volunteer Rescue Squad, with one vehicle, a 1950 Studebaker ambulance, housed in an unheated metal shed at the end of the island near Bowen’s Inn, since destroyed by fire.

Today its first due area is one of the county’s largest, running from just south of White Sands to the tip of the island, including the Dominion Cove Point LNG plant. They run almost 4,000 calls a year, the majority being rescue.

Before the department’s apparatus were dispatched to the dumpster fire at the landfill, The County Times talked to Chief Jonathan Dalrymple and Vice President Terry Johnson. President John Pardoe, Jr. was recuperating from recent knee surgery and was unable to make the event. Johnson was assuming two roles that morning, not only as VP of the department but president of the little league, which has almost 750 members, many of whom were there for the opening day along with their parents or guardians.

Dalrymple has been with Solomons for 10 years and before that was with Prince Frederick VFD for 10 years. He explained the role of the chief: “I oversee all the operations side, budgeting along with the administrative side, starting fundraisers, as you are at today and making sure that people have the right equipment.”

Johnson’s wife has been a member for 15 years, but he’s only been with them for three and a half. “I wanted to do it a long time ago. My job just didn’t permit me,” he said. He was a structural engineer in Rockville.

Of course, the role of the vice president is to fill in for the president. The president, Johnson said, “over-



Firefighter Scott Standberg, Jr.

sees the administrative side. He takes care of meeting with the board of directors and running the membership meetings as well. One of the vice president’s roles at our department is unique in that I’m in charge of the membership committee. All of the new members that come in, I interview them as part of the membership committee.”

Recruiting has become a big responsibility for the county’s volunteer emergency responders as growth in membership in some instances has lagged behind growth in calls, leading the county to propose beginning a paid cadre of paramedics and emergency medical technicians to supplement the volunteer ranks.

Johnson explained, “We do have a recruitment/retention committee as well that aids it,” noting, “We’re doing good. We have about 155 members. Our biggest challenge is retention. It’s hard to keep them because some of the younger ones come in and they start getting families or they move away, go to college.”

Dalrymple explained some of the tools the county has to retain members: “They offer day-care vouchers. They also offer \$2,500 towards the property taxes on your home in Calvert County. They’ve started now where if you get hurt in the line of duty, they’re trying

to do away with all property taxes. So, they are doing things to help us keep volunteers in the county.” He said businesses also offer volunteer discounts.

The manpower situation is exacerbated in Solomons by many of the volunteers leaving the area during the day for their jobs. Dalrymple said, “Some of my line officers that are retired have helped me out during the day. I wouldn’t have anybody right now during the day because we’re all at jobs or shift work. If it wasn’t for my deputy chiefs, Joseph Ford and Thomas Yowell, some days I don’t know what I would do.”

From its humble beginnings, according to a history of the department on the company’s website, “In 1955, operations were modified when a building (formerly Rubin’s Department Store) was purchased north of the island near the present location of Holiday Drive. Calvert Rescue Squad was assigned a radio frequency and all units were equipped with radios in 1962.”

The history continues: “Locally, the need for fire services became apparent necessitating addition of the Fire Division to Calvert Rescue Squad in 1963. Prior to this, the closest fire companies were in Prince Frederick (est. 1940), and North Beach (est. 1926). With the Fire Division came the need for a fire engine. This engine



e Squad & Fire Department

was a 1963 International 550 GPM front-mount pumper. The Fire Division became operational on September 18, 1963.”

In December 1967, the department became the Solomons Volunteer Rescue Squad and Fire Department. According to the history, “The company’s fire and rescue mission was expanded in 1974 to include water rescue and firefighting when a fire / rescue boat was placed in service.”

The company in the late 1970s purchased 7.9 acres of land at the corner of Dowell Road and Route 765. A new firehouse with four bays was built at the cost of \$324,000. A two-bay addition was later added. In 1991 three acres was purchased on Cove Point Road for a substation.

But space is an ongoing problem that is leading SVRS&FD to seek a new larger station. Johnson said, “The facility we are currently in simply does not have the space we need. We have 19 pieces of apparatus. That includes all the ambulances, the fire apparatus, the rescue apparatus, and the various command units and the utility trucks. There just simply isn’t enough room to put in everything.” And he added, the building is showing its age.

And he further explained, “We’d like to move a little farther north so that we can get a little farther up into the central part of our first due.” That will also allow Chesapeake Ranch Estates to retain a rating for lower insurance costs, Dalrymple said.

What is it about what they do that has attracted Dalrymple and Johnson to a volunteer gig that takes up so much of their spare personal time? Dalrymple said, “The love of it. I love doing it. I joined when I was 16 years old. My grandfather was a past chief of Solomons. He passed away 27 years ago. He was the first chief of St Leonard. So, it’s been in my blood. I watched St Leonard get built as a kid, and I joined as soon as I could. I just love it.” He said a lot of their members are continuing a tradition passed down in their family, although they do have some newcomers.

Johnson explained, “I just love giving back to the community. I wanted to do this when I was 18, but my



job just didn’t permit it, so I just started late in life and decided to just make that jump. Our current deputy chief, who was our chief before, Joe Ford, finally convinced me to make that jump. I was scared to make that jump, scared to go into a place I’ve never been to. I’ve never done anything like this in my life, but I’ve wanted to do it. And the department opened their arms to me and helped train me and get me where I’m at now. I just do everything I can. I volunteer a lot of hours down there at Solomons, a lot of hours at little league. I can’t thank Solomons enough for coming out on a Sunday afternoon to show the apparatus off and be here for these kids. “



Volunteering for the little league opening is just one of the many activities that make community such a big part of what they do. They also do the major events at Annemarie Gardens and Calvert Marine Museum. And they have breakfasts with Santa and the Easter Bunny, the latter this Sunday.

“Every December we do Santa runs where we take Santa’s sleigh through all the communities in our first due. This year was a very rainy day. It wasn’t the best one. And you’d could not believe the crowds that were out there to see Santa come through on a sleigh behind one of our utilities,” Dalrymple said.

So, what’s the message to those potential recruits? “You join, it’s a family. I have three kids and they spend multiple times at the firehouse with me and to just see the joy on their faces that daddy’s doing this to help people. It’s a brotherhood,” Dalrymple said.

Johnson added, “My youngest right now is six. All he does is play with fire trucks now. He lines them up at the house. I guess we’re starting our own generations.”

Dalrymple explained, “It’s really a family. I don’t think you can say it enough either. We take care of each other. If somebody else has a family problem, we wrap our arms around them, and we take care of that family. It doesn’t matter what time of the day it is, what it is. We take care of that family.”

Editors Note: This is the first of a monthly series of articles about the county’s emergency responders.

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Solomons VFD Chief Jonathan Dalrymple and VP Terry Johnson

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