

Fireman Dan Williams Captures State's Top VFW Honor

BY TERRY POPE

Flames were weaving orange patterns into the Fletcher Drive home when the first firefighters arrived before dawn.

"Half the house was just about gone," recalled Dan Williams, chief of the Leland Volunteer Fire Department.

In one window, firemer. spotted an elderly woman as she lay unconscious. Resident Ann White had tried to escape from the smoke and fumes. Her arms were resting on a windowsill high above the ground.

"I grabbed her around the waist and pulled her out," said Williams.

He and two others maintained cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) efforts until rescue personnel arrived that April 1989 morning.

"She's still hoarse today," Williams said. "She still has a hard time talking because of the smoke she breathed in."

But each time she sees Williams in the Leland grocery store where he is manager, Mrs. White never forgets to give him a hug and to thank the 31-year-old for helping to save her life.

A spokesperson at Duke Medical Center later said if Williams and the other volunteers had not acted as quickly as they did, Mrs. White would not have lived. Her condition was so serious that she was transported by helicopter to Durham for treatment.

"I'm definitely not out here to win any rewards," he added. "The biggest reward for me was helping to save Mrs. White. That's rewarding enough for me."

The three-time Leland Volunteer Fireman of the Year recently captured two other high honors including the state Outstanding Firefighter Gold Medal Award given by the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

He was nominated by Leland VFW Post No. 9408, won the county event and advanced to the state level. On April 27, Williams learned that out of approximately 300 nominees from across North Carolina, he was chosen state fireman of the year and will advance to national competition in Washington, D.C., this summer.

"If you stay in firefighting and you're involved in saving just one life, it's worth it," said Williams. "If I don't help save anyone else, it's been rewarding enough for me."

He joined the fire department nine years ago, was elected chief in 1988 and has been nominated for a Governor's Volunteer Award. He and his wife, Diane, have three children, Avery, Brandy and Daniel.

After graduating from T.L. Hanna High School in Anderson, S.C., Williams began work bagging groceries and was steadily promoted in the business to store manager. In 1983 some friends convinced him to join the fire department where he served as treasurer in 1984, president in 1985, assistant chief in 1986 and was elected chief four years ago.

"It's hard to get out once you get involved," Williams noted. "You've got to like it to do it, especially when you're a volunteer."

Still, Williams insists that he and the volunteers all work together, that achievements are earned by all. His 28-member crew leads a fire safety drill each year at Lincoln Primary School where students get hands-on

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experience of what to do in the event of a fire either at school or at home.

Under his leadership, firemen are taking extensive training to become certified as firefighter I, II and III. A new pumper truck was purchased recently that could help lower the fire insurance rating for Leland homeowners. A truck raffle held last year raised nearly \$10,000 for the department.

As local fire chief, Williams is always seeking ways to improve the community, noted Leland Councilman George Yates in his letter that nominated Williams for the county VFW award.

"He is a highly-respected leader among his peers as evidenced when he was recently re-elected to another term as fire chief," Yates stated. "In spite of the rigorous demand on his time resulting from being a volunteer fireman while holding down a full-time job, Dan is always ready to listen and help people in the community when they have a need."

The key to leading a fire department is to treat it as a business and to care for its individuals, said Williams.

"It's volunteer work, but you still have to have someone halfway in charge," he said. "To a certain extent you have to tell these guys what to do, but you've got to realize that they are volunteers. They're doing this for nothing. You've got to get the right line of communication there."

Volunteers range in age from 17 to 55. Many must also be active in fund raising for there is never enough money without generous donations.

"That's probably the number one problem in an organization like this," he said. "But if you manage your money right, you can get by."

Departments receive \$13,500 annually from the county and receive the rest through donations or district emergency funds. Last year, the department's insurance bill alone was \$9,770 for its buildings and trucks.

On the average, Leland's station responds to 175 to 225 fire calls each year.

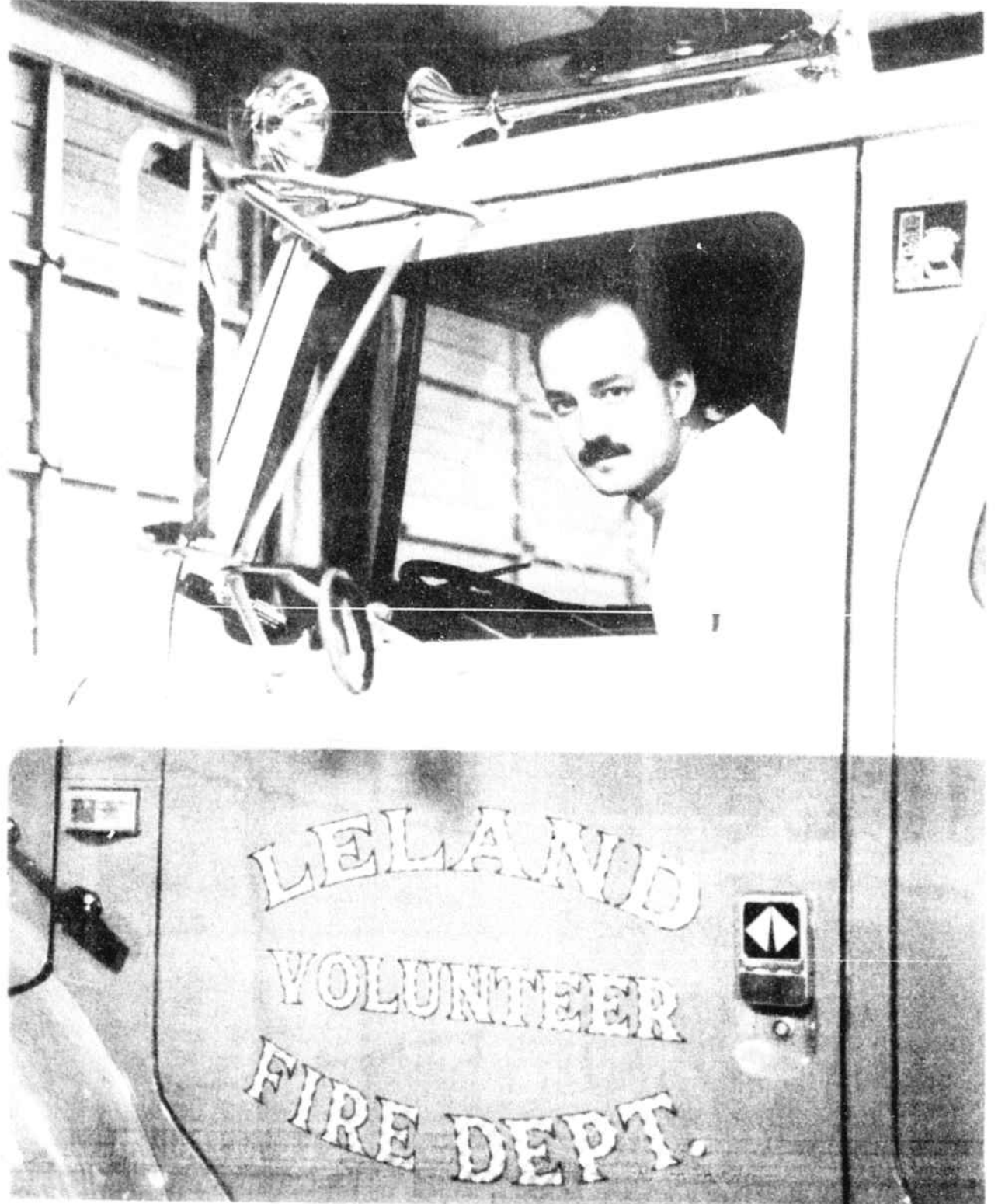
"They kind of run in spells," said Williams. "We have answered as many as eight calls in one day. But that doesn't happen too often."

Around his home, Williams has a collection of fire memorabilia with remote-controlled fire trucks, an old New York style fire helmet, a Mickey Mouse fire truck and custom clocks resting on a shelf.

He will leave this week to accept his Outstanding Firefighter Gold Medal Award at a state VFW convention, but admits that he was shocked to hear that he had won.

Now he has another goal—to improve the department's fire rating this year so Leland homeowners' insurance premiums will not cost as much.

"If we can do that it will help the community more than anything else," he said.



LELAND'S DAN WILLIAMS was chosen the state's top fireman in a competition sponsored by the Veterans of Foreign Wars organization.

STAFF PHOTO BY TERRY POPE

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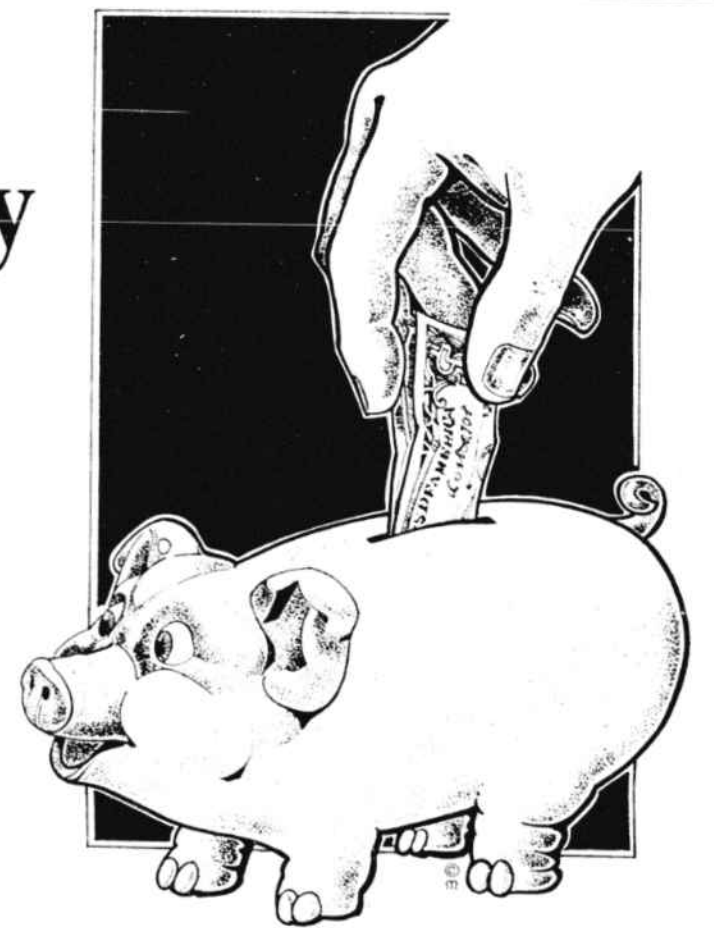
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