

Zulliger has 33 years under his belt at IV Fire District

By
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IVN Contributing Writer

Captain Tom Zulliger is the IV Fire District’s longest-serving volunteer, with almost 33 years of service to his credit. That’s a lot of interrupted meals and the Valley is full of people who think of Zulliger as a hero.

“My father was a career firefighter, so I had respect for the work,” Zulliger said. “When we moved here, my neighbor, Ken Craft, was the Assistant Fire Chief. He recruited me in 1981.”

There was no fire academy when Zulliger began. He was given a fire manual, watched a few films and attended Tuesday night trainings.

“I just jumped on board,” he said. “Things were a lot different back then.”

Typically, volunteer firefighters serve from two to ten years. Zulliger’s long tenure in what can be difficult work, both physically and psychologically, speaks to the kind of stuff he’s made of.

But, he discounts any accolades.

“Maybe I’m a bit of an adrenaline junkie,” Zulliger said. “It’s in my blood. And it’s been rewarding.”

“I love to see his passion and commitment,” said his wife, Judith. “Sure, there’s been a lot of interruptions, but it’s all about priorities. And the memories are good. I still chuckle about the time he jumped out of the shower with shampoo in his hair and flew out

the door. After almost 50 years of marriage, I’m still so proud of him.”
 Zulliger was the first volunteer to become a duty officer in the district, when in 1985, he was asked to become a captain, a position he held until 1991. Then, while taking time off from that leadership role, he remained on board as a volunteer firefighter. When Zulliger was asked again to serve as a volunteer duty officer in 2001, he agreed.

“When I started working here, Tom helped train me,” said IV Fire District Division Chief Kamron Ismaili. “Tom’s seen many technical and equipment changes during his time. He’s got a wealth of experience and knowledge and he’s really there when you need him. We depend on all our volunteers, but someone like Tom, who knows what’s going on, is a tremendous asset. He’s easy to work with, helps train others and sets a great example.”

Both Ismaili and Zulliger agree that volunteers become more capable overall as they learn new skills that transfer to other aspects of their lives.

In addition to fighting fires, the volunteers are often the first on the scene after bad accidents. On New Year’s Day in 2001, Zulliger responded to a plane crash, after a twin engine airplane took off from Oakland and tried to fly over a big storm.

“Every decision they made was a bad one,” Zulliger said. “There was heavy turbulence and they lost power and tried to land at the IV Airport. Snow complicated the situation and the plane hit a tree and landed upside-

down on the shoulder of Highway 199.”
 The aircraft’s cockpit was obliterated in the crash and the pilot died. One woman was ejected from the plane upon impact but survived with minimal injuries, while a man in the back seat suffered head wounds. Another woman “had to be extricated and she lost a foot,” according to Zulliger.

Conceding that this work isn’t for everyone, Zulliger admits he’s seen some rough things that are hard to erase from his memory, but he’s quick to add that people might be surprised to learn they can handle more than they realize.

“It’s funny, I can watch a movie where someone’s being operated on and get real squeamish. But then I go out in real life situations and there’s blood everywhere — you just do what you have to do,” Zulliger said. “Some people are able to desensitize. But you have to want to do it, it’s a labor of love.”

Zulliger said the firefighters form strong bonds.

“We go through a lot together and develop deep friendships based on teamwork and respect,” he said.

M a n y Valley residents remember the 2007 Pizza Pit

incident. Zulliger explained how “Joe Feldhause and I were first on the scene.” A motorhome took out the whole wall of the Cave Junction restaurant when the driver’s cruise control got stuck, he said. The driver had severe head injuries and his wife was buried by debris.

“All I could see were her hands,” Zulliger said. “I told her don’t open your eyes and don’t move. She and another couple in the motor home had to be extricated.”

“To have someone come up and say, ‘You saved my life,’ that is huge,” Zulliger said. “It’s a good feeling to know you can really make a difference.”

Zulliger remembers years when the district had 60 volunteers. Each of the Valley’s five fire stations had eight or nine people. Now there are only three people in most stations and just one volunteer in Takilma. This concerns Zulliger.

“I’m 71 and I can still do this

work,” he said. “Lots of folks don’t have full-time jobs and could get involved. People might be surprised to find out how good it feels to give something back to the community. Giving that helping hand as a volunteer firefighter, well, it really says something about a person.”

New volunteers with the IV Fire District begin training with the Fire Academy on September 7 and attend every other weekend, for eight hours on both Saturday and Sunday, for seven weeks. Volunteers then serve two 12-hour shifts per month. More recruits are sought. Stop by the fire station on Caves Highway or call 541-592-2225 to contact Recruitment and Retention Officer Robert Sitton to learn more.

This article is the first in a series exploring volunteer opportunities and experiences within the IV Fire District. Next week’s installment will cover details of interest to those considering volunteer service.



Tom Zulliger, IVFD 33-year veteran

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Check Those that Apply:
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 \$5.00 usage fee (see below)
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 Mailing Address: _____
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| ☐ Religious | ☐ Sports/Athletics | ☐ Marching |
| ☐ Humorous | ☐ Club/Organization (Youth) | ☐ Political |
| ☐ Commercial | ☐ Club/Organization (Adult) | ☐ Tuff Truck |
| ☐ Truck | ☐ Commercial Truck | ☐ Tractor |
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