

For this firefighter, the accent is on service

Pioneer ends career amid statewide praise

By PATRICK WEBB
For EO Media Group

ILWACO, Wash. — Agnes Waliser didn't set out to be a pioneering female firefighter. She had a different career path in mind.

Growing up in Switzerland, Waliser watched ocean scientist Jacques Cousteau on TV and dreamed of strapping on her scuba tanks and diving with dolphins.

Instead, Waliser is about to retire after a career as a professional firefighter on the Long Beach Peninsula.

But before she does, she will be honored this weekend at the American Legion state convention in Kennewick as Washington's Firefighter of the Year.

"I know I was kind of a pioneer," she said, noting that fewer than 1 in 10 firefighters nationally are women.

Proving herself

Waliser's parents were Hungarian artists who fled to Switzerland when Russian tanks rolled into Budapest in 1956.

She grew up first speaking Hungarian, then French



Patrick Webb/For EO Media Group

Agnes Waliser enjoys a quiet moment at home in Ilwaco, Wash., with her dogs, Lola and Tommy. The professional lifesaver from Pacific County Fire District No. 1 will be honored by the American Legion at the weekend as the state Firefighter of the Year.

in Lausanne, on the banks of scenic Lake Geneva. After earning a degree in zoology at her hometown university, and qualifying as a scuba-diving instructor, Waliser wanted to research the intelligence of dolphins. She began that path with an internship at the University of Hawaii and later studied killer whales in the San Juan Islands.

Life took a different direction when she met and married a man from Ocean Park.

Becoming a volunteer firefighter with Pacific County

District 1 seemed natural, working with the peninsula surf rescue team to use her scuba training and strengths as a competitive swimmer.

She was the first female in Pacific County to become a certified firefighter with the state. Adding to her experience and training with emergency medical technician and other credentials, Waliser was hired as a paid firefighter in 2001.

"We had female volunteers, but I was the first paid female firefighter with the district," she said.

"I spent a lot of time trying to prove myself. I was female; I am not as strong as the guys — I never will be. But I felt I was 'one of the guys' fairly quickly."

In 2007, after considerable competitive testing, Waliser was promoted to captain. She supervised a crew of four split between the Ocean Park and Seaview fire stations. She earned her certification as a fire officer in 2014.

Last month, she relinquished that role and returned to firefighter rank to ensure a seamless transition when she retires in early September.

"I wasn't a bossy captain, it was all collaborative," she said. "The welfare of my crew has always come first. I was the 'softer' captain, not one of those 'Type A' guys."

She laughed. "They say 'Agnes is everybody's mom.' I tend to be a 'mother hen.' I'm 10 to 15 years older, sometimes 20 years older, than some of them."

Working smart

Gender has never been her biggest issue. Instead, she said, it is her voice. She has encountered numerous medical patients who could not immediately understand her questions — spoken in English, but in her noticeable Swiss-French accent. She said that sometimes co-workers have had to "translate."

Her successor as captain, Matt Beaulaurier, said understanding Waliser has never been a problem for those on her crew. "We are used to her accent — we don't even pay attention to that, although sometimes when we are dealing with older folks who hear too well, we have to help."

At 6-3, Beaulaurier offers a contrasting build to Waliser, but he said there have never been any questions about her effectiveness. "Being shorter in stature, she is the type to find a way to work smarter, not harder," he said.

He is full of praise for the manner in which she has made their job-swap a smooth tran-

sition. "She has helped me out in 'passing the torch,' so to speak. She has been so good to work for. She is someone who always puts others first."

Excitement

But back pain and sleep deprivation issues from 24-hour shifts helped Waliser make the decision to retire.

"I will miss it. I can still fight fire, but I am not as fast as I was," she said. "It's getting harder for me to do the physical part."

Shift rotations mean repeated 24-hour stints then four days off. Crew members sleep during part of their shifts at the fire station so they are available to respond immediately.

"I don't recover as fast as I did 20 years ago," she said. "And even if we don't have a call, you sleep with one eye open and one ear up. You have to be ready when the bell goes off."

"You have to be 100 percent ready — physically and mentally. You have to be on top of your game. Physically there is no chance to warm up your muscles."

But Waliser, 51, has enjoyed these challenges

"I have loved the job," she said. "I have enjoyed going to calls. Every one is a little different. You have to think on your feet — quickly figure things out. There's a puzzle to solve quickly, so it doesn't get worse."

"You can't pass the buck to someone else. You are 911 — you have to cope. You are 'it.' There's definitely excitement in successfully figuring out how to resolve the problem and make it better."

"You can't save everyone, but we certainly try. You have to put your heads together and figure it out. That is the very rewarding part of it."

Role model

Away from the job, Waliser has continued her passion for working with animals at the Wildlife Center of the Northwest in Astoria. She and its late founder, Sharnelle Fee,

shared many adventures, and she serves on its board.

After a divorce, Waliser remarried in 2011. She met her husband, Mark, through a shared interest in golf; they also encountered each other when her ambulance brought patients into Ocean Beach Hospital in Ilwaco where he worked as an emergency room doctor.

This weekend's awards event will be her second time attending the American Legion convention. Waliser represented her District 1 colleague Joyce Tuerck, who died in 2015 one month before she could receive the Legion's state EMT honor. She acknowledged that the awards generally highlight community service — going beyond the job.

That was reflected in District 1 Fire Chief Jacob Brundage's recommendation letter for the local Legion award in November. "Whether it is random acts of kindness, or helping out a co-worker in need, Agnes is there to help," he wrote.

Waliser noted she has fed patients' cats when they are in the hospital, and joined with colleagues to purchase and deliver Christmas groceries for people they have aided.

"It's the right thing to do," she said. "We can't help everybody, but if there's a way I can do a little extra, I will."

That, and a positive disposition are key. "Most people on the peninsula have been awesome, but some people still come in and ask the guy firefighter their question, even though I am the captain," she laughed.

She's a willing role model, having spoken on a panel at Clatsop Community College about women in leadership roles. She relishes the chance to put on her uniform and drive the fire truck to schools during the annual Fire Prevention Week.

"I tell little girls, 'You can do this, too. If that's the career you want, everything is possible."

"Yes, you can do it!"



ALMANAC

Astoria through Thursday.

Temperatures

High/low 67°/54°
Normal high/low 68°/54°
Record high 86° in 1946
Record low 41° in 1930

Precipitation

Thursday 0.08"
Month to date 0.10"
Normal month to date 0.75"
Year to date 49.67"
Normal year to date 36.66"

SUN AND MOON

Sunset tonight 8:58 p.m.
Sunrise Saturday 5:46 a.m.
Moonrise today 4:00 a.m.
Moonset today 7:28 p.m.

New First Full Last

July 23 July 30 Aug 7 Aug 14

UNDER THE SKY

Tonight's Sky: The bright star Capella of Auriga will emerge from the northeast around midnight.

TOMORROW'S TIDES

Astoria / Port Docks

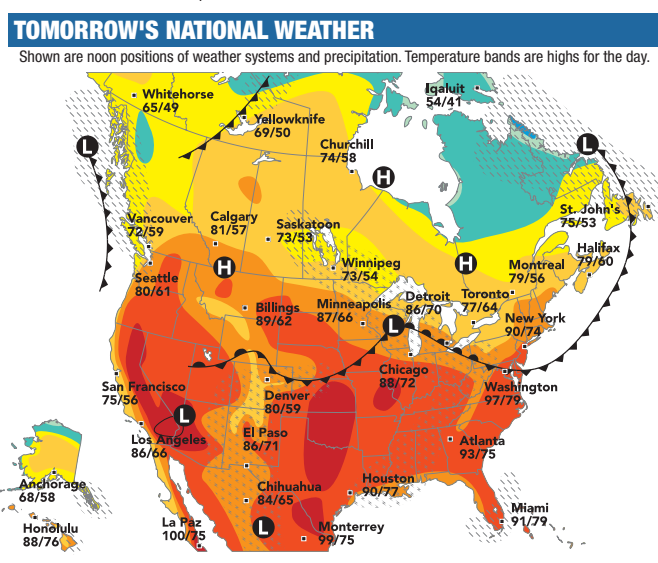
Time	High	Time	Low
12:21 a.m.	9.5 ft.	7:32 a.m.	-1.7 ft.
1:51 p.m.	7.6 ft.	7:20 p.m.	1.9 ft.

NATIONAL CITIES

City	Today	Hi	Lo	W	Sat.	Hi	Lo	W
Atlanta	95	75	s	93	75	pc		
Boston	92	71	s	88	66	pc		
Chicago	87	73	t	88	72	t		
Denver	90	63	t	80	59	t		
Des Moines	100	80	pc	95	72	pc		
Detroit	91	71	pc	86	70	t		
El Paso	86	70	t	86	71	t		
Fairbanks	91	71	pc	75	60	pc		
Honolulu	88	77	pc	88	76	pc		
Indianapolis	91	76	t	91	76	t		
Kansas City	97	80	s	98	73	pc		
Las Vegas	104	83	s	107	87	s		
Los Angeles	85	66	pc	86	66	pc		
Memphis	98	79	s	97	78	t		
Miami	91	79	t	91	79	t		
Nashville	97	78	t	96	78	t		
New Orleans	93	77	t	89	76	t		
New York	92	75	pc	90	74	t		
Oklahoma City	101	76	s	101	75	s		
Philadelphia	95	76	pc	93	76	t		
St. Louis	104	83	pc	105	78	s		
Salt Lake City	94	72	pc	97	73	s		
San Francisco	70	54	pc	75	56	pc		
Seattle	76	61	pc	80	61	pc		
Washington, DC	96	80	pc	97	79	t		

REGIONAL CITIES

City	Today	Hi	Lo	W	Sat.	Hi	Lo	W
Baker City	84	47	s	88	49	s		
Bend	86	52	s	92	58	pc		
Brookings	65	54	pc	73	58	pc		
Eugene	85	53	s	91	59	s		
Ilwaco	67	59	pc	69	57	s		
Klamath Falls	86	49	s	93	54	s		
Medford	93	60	s	100	66	s		
Newberg	93	58	s	90	60	s		
Newport	63	52	pc	66	52	s		
North Bend	67	54	pc	69	56	s		
Olympia	77	57	s	81	57	pc		
Pendleton	88	59	s	94	65	s		
Portland	83	62	s	89	63	s		
Roseburg	87	57	s	95	65	s		
Salem	85	59	s	92	62	s		
Seaside	69	58	pc	72	57	s		
Spokane	81	59	pc	88	64	s		
Springfield	84	54	s	91	61	s		
Vancouver	82	60	s	88	62	s		
Yakima	89	61	s	96	66	s		



Stop! In the name of walkers

The Daily Astorian

Astoria Police will keep a careful eye Monday on drivers who don't obey pedestrian safety laws.

Extra officers will be on duty to act as pedestrians crossing both marked and unmarked crosswalks. Drivers who don't stop or pass another vehicle that does stop may face a \$260 fine. Other traffic violations will be enforced in this period, as well.

The program is funded through a grant from Oregon Impact, a nonprofit group that aims to curb traffic deaths.



The Daily Astorian/File Photo

Chris McNeary, now a sergeant, walks with German shepherd McKinley and points out a car that failed to yield to him while using the crosswalk on Sixth Street and Marine Drive in 2011.

Meet with City Councilor Brownson Saturday

The Daily Astorian

Astoria City Councilor Tom Brownson is holding a "Meet Your Councilor" event at 9 a.m. Saturday at Three Cups Coffee House, under the bridge at 279 W. Marine Drive.

DEATH

July 15, 2017

MELSON, Marlin, 58, of Astoria, died in Astoria. His family and friends will gather on Sunday for a memorial at the South Jetty. Contact the family for details.

PUBLIC MEETINGS

FRIDAY

Oregon Recreation Trails Advisory Council, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Holiday Inn Express, 204 West Marine Drive.

LOTTERIES

OREGON

Thursday's Pick 4:

- 1 p.m.: 1-7-8-2
- 4 p.m.: 4-4-5-4
- 7 p.m.: 3-0-3-7
- 10 p.m.: 2-8-3-5

WASHINGTON

- Thursday's Daily Game: 6-9-6
- Thursday's Keno: 06-08-11-17-19-20-21-24-27-28-30-31-34-40-43-53-54-74-77-80
- Thursday's Match 4: 09-15-18-23

KEEN

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