

Beck from 1B

are, we're here to help."

By that time, his responsibility was logistics — "Mainly getting food, water and vehicles," Beck said. "When you get older in the fire service, you kind of stop throwing dirt and squirting water, getting into the management end. You wear out going up and down those hills, throwing dirt."

In years between, Beck described his experience as an exciting adventure.

"It's fun, traveling all over the west," he said. "I saw places I would never have seen otherwise. You get to see things you never get to see as a civilian."

He threw dirt in Arizona, squirted water in Montana, and even helped the rescue teams during Hurricane Katrina.

"That was pretty exciting. I'd never been south," Beck said. "They had everyone from around the country helping out."

It was sometimes a difficult life, with Beck occasionally leaving home for weeks on end.

"Three weeks was the limit, and after that you were physically exhausted," Beck said. "There was one summer where I was gone 80 days. You'd go home, get a couple days off to do your laundry. Day or two later, the phone would ring and off you went."

In the early days, before cell phones, it was difficult to keep in contact back home.

"The wives didn't know what was going on, and sometimes didn't even know where you went," Beck said. "You might end up in a different state, and unless you can get to a phone booth and call home, sometimes they didn't hear from you for quite a while."

While his family at home may have been fearful for his safety as he went out, Beck said he rarely felt the job was dangerous.

"It's hair raising at times," Beck said. "I've been on these really big fires, which was a little more dangerous

because of the unpredictability of wildland fires. Wind directions and fuels — but we're so safety conscious. If it's not safe, we're not going to do it. We call it 'stand down.' Safety is paramount. You can always grow more trees and build another house. You can't grow another person."

When he first began, things were rough — No showers, limited food.

"In the old days, you had to fill up your canteen. Now it's bottled water and luxury dinners," Beck said. "Coming back to dinner is like going to a buffet restaurant. Holy mackerel. I told my wife, 'You know what I really miss about going out is the food, they fed us like kings!'"

But for Beck, the best part was the people.

"I worked with the same people that I started with," Beck said. "I continued to work with them for 40 years. It's hard to walk away. Fire season is almost like reunion time. You see people on fires that you only see during fire season. It's like, 'Hey, haven't seen you all year.' I work with people my whole life. It's the camaraderie of friends."

While Beck was throwing dirt during the summer fire season, at home he was building up the Canary fire program.

"When we moved out here in 1980, there was no fire department," Beck said. "This was all dairy farmers and logging industry, which was what Canary was built around. We worked with the state and got a truck. And then we worked with SVFR in town to annex our area into their district. That led us to build a new fire station, which was quite a chore to get annexed."

There was pushback from the community at first with the concept of taxes.

"People out here never paid taxes for fire service before," Beck said. "The best thing about it was the amount they paid in taxes was far less because their insurance went down dramatically. All of a sudden, they had fire protection. That was nice to have the

support of the grange and the local community to get it built by 1990."

Beck enjoyed jumping on the truck and speeding down the highway with the siren blaring.

"Over the career of 40 years, you go on a lot of calls," Beck said. "Even if you went on one or two calls a month, over 40 years, that adds up to getting woken up in the middle of the night a lot of times, jumping on the truck."

Still, getting calls in the middle of the night wasn't easy.

"You wake up in the middle of the night and you hear the call, and you think, 'Should I go? It's way north of town,'" Beck said. "But you're already woken up, so you go down to the fire station and see if they need help. Toward the end it gets, 'Ugh, another 3 a.m. call.' It's not hard to get up when you're 40. When you hit 70, it's not as easy to jump up, go downstairs, get dressed, go to the fire station. You're going a little slower. 'Hey wait for me, I'm coming!'"

Beck was also instrumental in getting scholarships to students interested in a career in firefighting.

"I created a scholarship program around 1992. We never had a scholarship. We used to spend money on banquets and parties. I put together a proposal to start a scholarship for students going into the medical or fire fields. Every firefighter kicked in a dollar a month out of their pay. I thought it would be a struggle to squeeze money out of them, but it was easy to do."

The plan was to have a yearly scholarship of \$1,000.

"As soon as we did that, the city fire department didn't want to be outdone, so they created a scholarship, too," Now, we're combined and we're all one, but we give two scholarships away a year. It's going to go on forever, I hope."

Many of the scholarship winners stayed with local fire departments after receiving the scholarship.

"I encourage the kids I

know who are graduating to get a summer job with the different agencies. 'Hey, you're 18 years old and you'll have this cool job. Stick with it. Down the road, it's a great career. Twenty, 30 years is going to roll around and you'll have one of the best jobs in town. You get to serve the public and meet everyone in town.'"

Beck also worked as inspiration for many younger recruits, including Matt House, SVFR's current Operations Chief.

"I grew up with his son, we went to school together," House said. "When I joined the fire department, it was with Florence at the time. And then we merged, he was influential on my career, teaching me how to keep focused on the task at hand."

House said that he's always watched leaders in SVFR, picking the good and bad out, and incorporating them into his own toolbox.

"With Battalion Chief Beck, it was all good," House said. "Anytime that he spoke, anytime that he interacted with the community, the volunteer, the paid staff — it was always top notch. I observed how to communicate from him. He gave me a foundation to build off of."

It was the way that Beck spoke to everyone, with every issue a learning moment, not a criticism.

"I'm very happy for him," House said. "It's a big loss in our leadership that we have to look to fill. And do you ever get to fill the big shoes that he had? We'll just have to continue on and do the best we can."

Beck said that he feels the community is lucky to have employees like House.

"It's a newer, younger crowd, they're taking over," Beck said. "We have some really good people at that fire department. We've come a long way, the community of Florence."

Beck said it's going to be hard to leave, but "My wife is loving it — we don't get calls in the middle of the night anymore."

And Beck won't be completely absent from the

scene.

"We have a dinner once a month at the fire station," he said. "I'll still be slipping into that dinner once in a while. We have some really good people at that fire depart-

ment. We've come a long way, the community of Florence. You see the department grow into just stellar stuff. Good department, good training, good people."

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