

Gerry Hourigan 1915 – 2007

Volunteer dedicated to caring for firefighters

Gerry Hourigan co-founded Box 43 canteen service

By Carmela Fragomeni

Neither "snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night" could stop Gerry Hourigan from rushing off to a fire. In the middle of the night, during Christmas dinner, while company was over and sometimes on the job -- it didn't matter.

He had to ensure firefighters had a hot cup of coffee, cake, sandwiches and dry socks to sustain them.

Hourigan, a founder of a volunteer canteen service for Hamilton's firefighters called Box 43, died Saturday at the age of 92.

Since 1950, when the canteen first served coffee out of a car trunk, Box 43 has been invaluable to the city's firefighters.

Len Saltmarsh, fire chief from 1972 to 1989, remembers a particularly nasty fire Christmas Day in 1976 that burned down the Wentworth Arms Hotel downtown and took six lives. Hourigan and his volunteer crew left their Christmas dinners to be there to the bitter end, through the evening to the following morning.

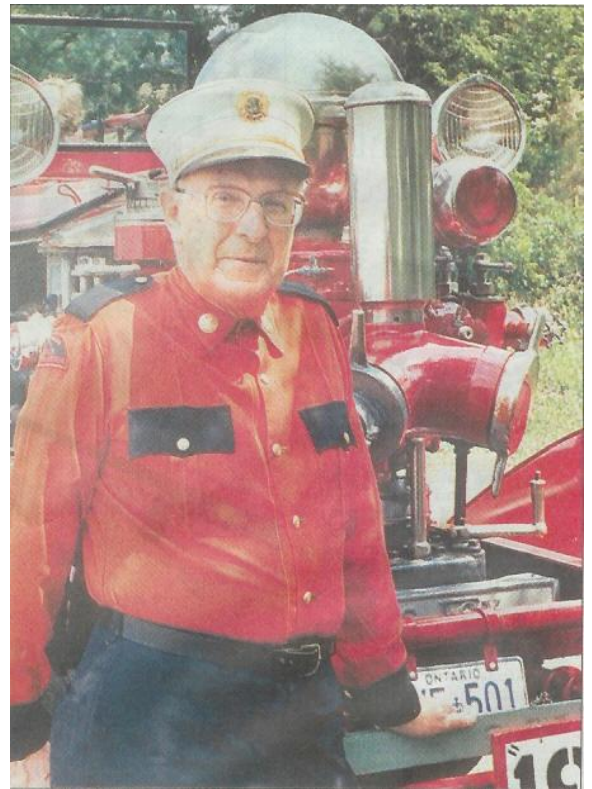
On a hot sweltering day when firefighters were exhausted and dehydrated, or on a sub-zero day when their faces were frozen and covered in ice, "it meant a helluva lot," says Saltmarsh.

Hourigan's son Paul, a retired Spectator photographer, remembers his father going out to fires at 2 or 3 a.m. and sometimes not returning for two or three days.

"He'd just up and go. If there was a fire, my father was gone."

The fire and police monitor was on in the house 24/7 and when Hourigan also drove ambulances at a time when there were privately owned, there was always an ambulance parked in the driveway. It all made life at home very exciting for Hourigan's two sons and daughter. At age 12, Paul started accompanying his dad and the experiences led him to a news career in which he took pictures at fires while his dad worked the canteen.

"It was fun growing up with him," says Paul.



Paul Meredith, current assistant deputy chief of operations, says firefighters came to trust that Hourigan and the rest of the canteen would always be there. "There was never any question they'd show up."

Box 43 president Alan Weddum says Hourigan "left a living legacy with the creation and nurturing of Box 43." His leadership made the organization strong in "providing an invaluable service to the fire and police departments of this city."

He says Hourigan was so dedicated, he always had his fire boots, coat and hat at the foot of the door, ready to grab in case he had to run out.

One of his funny and many favourite stories is how in the 1930s when he was first married, he left work in the middle of delivering bread to attend to a fire a block away. His delivery horse Molly continued on her route with the bread wagon and Hourigan couldn't find her when he returned to the street. Molly had returned to the bakery, leaving the owners puzzled as to what happened to Hourigan.

In later years, Hourigan served as president of the International Fire Buffs Association whose members run similar canteens across Canada and the U.S. and are firefighting historians.

The Hamilton canteen, likely the first of its kind in Ontario, was modeled after one Hourigan and co-founders Jim Campbell, Albert Cooke and Glen Crawford saw in Montreal, Weddum says. It started from a car trunk, graduating to an old used bread truck and then a second-hand newspaper delivery truck from The Spectator.

Initially, the founders paid for everything, but the firefighters union later stepped in to pay for the food and refreshments. The canteen volunteers then raised money for their other passion, refurbishing old fire trucks, some of which Hourigan rode in area Christmas parades.

Hourigan, whose great-great-grandfather was fire chief in Dundas, was with the Royal Canadian Air Force's fire department in Toronto during the Second World War.

After the war, he got a job with Union Gas and by the time he was offered a job with the fire department. it was \$15 a week less than what he was already making. He stayed with the gas company for 32 years before retiring.

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