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AFTER RETIREMENT, SAFETY STILL A PRIORITY

BOB ZARLE CONTINUES TO KEEP EAR ON THE RADIO

Jim Carney, Beacon Journal staff writer

You can take the helmet and badge off the fireman, but you can't take the desire to serve out of his heart.

Even though he has retired from two law enforcement jobs, Bob Zarle, 63, still listens to fire scanners and police radios.

"Every time I hear a siren, I get chills and wonder what's happening," he said.

Zarle served nearly 30 years as a Summit County sheriff's deputy, retiring in 1990 with the rank of lieutenant. Two months ago, he retired from Northfield Center Township Fire Department, where he had volunteered for 16 years, serving as assistant chief for some of that time.

He's still secretary to the Summit County Fire Chiefs Association and teaches as an adjunct instructor for the state fire marshal.

During his long safety career, Zarle, who lives in Northfield Center, became known for his expertise in dealing with hazardous chemicals and materials. In 1972, he joined the Summit County Sheriff's Office's first bomb squad.

"A lot of calls were war souvenirs," he said.

The squad got reports of dynamite finds in old barns, and occasionally bombs were discovered as well. The team also responded to spills of hazardous chemicals and toxic agents.

"There was not much training in those days," Zarle said.

So he soon was traveling around the country to take classes on the dangerous materials with which he was dealing.

When the Summit County Hazardous Materials Team hit the streets in 1986, Zarle was a member as well as the team's instructor.

"Up until the early 1980s, Bob was the only person to call if you had a hazmat problem," said Bob Dauchy, a retired Stow Fire Department chief and former head of the county hazmat team. "He didn't have a team -- just the local safety people who had the problem and no education."

Dauchy, who now lives in Australia, reminisced about Zarle via e-mail.

"In fact, he was the only resource for training our team," Dauchy said. "I remember sitting in his classes at Christmas time in 1984 in the old Copley Township Hall, wondering what our families were thinking about this training, when we should've been spending time with them."

Copley Township Fire Chief Joe Ezzie said Zarle helped lay the groundwork for today's hazardous materials team.

"Before there was a county hazardous-materials team," Ezzie said, "it was the 'Bob Zarle Hazardous Materials Team.' "

He praised Zarle for having the insight in the '70s and early '80s "to see some of the issues."

Ronald Floyd, the retired chief of emergency services for Goodyear, was the first director of operations for the county haz-mat team. He said Zarle learned about hazardous materials on his own time.

"He was way ahead of his time," Floyd said. "He did everything. . . . It was always volunteer."

Jo Anne Zarle, a retired registered nurse at Akron City Hospital, got used to her husband's long and odd hours over the 27 years of their marriage.

"There were a lot of old meals . . . a lot of missed meals," she said. " . . . Once the fire department gets in your blood, you can't get it out. They always have that in their system."

Zarle's professional interest in explosives, and their safe handling, took him to Oklahoma City a few months after the April 1995 bombing of the federal building.

The explosive had been made of ammonium nitrate fertilizer -- something Zarle suspected when he first heard about the bombing. He wanted to see the damage it had caused.

"I had to see it," Zarle said.

Six years later, on Sept. 11, 2001, Zarle and his wife were in Oklahoma City again. They were about to leave their hotel room to see the federal building bombing memorial when a jet flew into the World Trade Center.

It was a strange coincidence for an expert on hazardous materials. And, as such, he has a keen awareness of our nation's vulnerability.

"We don't know where these people (terrorists) are," Zarle said. "We know they are around."