
FIRE DEPARTMENT
CHICAGO FIRE DEPT.

ON WATCH AT ENGINE 88

Life in one of the city's last single-vehicle firehouses is not conducive to loners. Though the pace may be less hectic than in the bigger houses, the demand for teamwork is high.

By Robert Cross
Photos by Charles Osgood

Engine Company 88 occupies a narrow brick building on the northwest corner of St. Louis Avenue and 60th Street, a crossroads that surely must be one of the most undistinguished in the city. And, just as surely, the residents around there prefer it that way. They want quiet streets, tranquil homes, and smooth transitions rather than big events — like fires.

They appreciate their firehouse (or should) because it fits right into this setting. The only time it strikes a jarring note is at 10:30 on Tuesday mornings, when the Civil Defense siren on the roof reminds everyone how it will sound if a belligerent nation starts lobbing nuclear warheads. Otherwise, the 80-year-old structure (renovated in 1927) exudes old-fashioned calm. It is just a single-door, single-vehicle station, one of the last 10 in Chicago that has not become some sort of dual- or multi-function "public safety facility" supplemented by a team of paramedics, or another piece of equipment, or a panoply of firefighting units all under one roof.

Even so, Engine 88 itself is modern enough. A 1974 Mack MB-600 fitted with equipment manufactured by Waterous Pump of St. Paul, Minn., the truck has five hose ports that can release 250 gallons of water a minute at 150 pounds of pressure. For minor fires, it has an onboard reservoir that holds 500 gallons. Most of the time, these capabilities are more than enough. Fires are a relative rarity in this territory, and a majority of them turn out to be of little consequence. After six years of service, Engine 88's odometer has clocked a mere 35,000 miles, and — because the odometer is connected to the diesel engine, rather than the wheels — a portion of that figure represents the 25 "miles" recorded for every hour that the engine has been used to run the water pump.

Three crews of six men each are assigned to regular duty at Engine Company 88. The regulars are spelled by roving substitutes who fill in during days off and furloughs. Each firefighter, engineer (truck driver and pump handler), and officer works 24 hours every three days — "24 on, 48 off." After working five consecutive tours of duty, the crew member gets a free day. They may go weeks without encountering a fire of any consequence, but they do have regular chores: housekeeping, truck and hose maintenance, daily drills, hydrant checkups, and inspections of all buildings in the district that are not private homes. None of this routine can be performed individually or with an air of detachment. Even during long periods of inactivity, the men must function together because, inevitably, there will come a moment when teamwork will be essential.

Lt. Frank Craven (foreground) and his crew at Engine Company 88 (clockwise, from lower left): firefighters Ed McGovern, Ed Burgess (in station), and Joe Spitill, engineer Ed Waters, and candidate Robert Atkins.

"The whole thing about the Fire Department, regardless of whether you're busy or not, is getting along with one another," says Capt. Bill Purl, the man who has ultimate responsibility for Engine Company 88. Purl, the highest-ranking officer, "owns" the house. It is "his" even during Purl's days off, when Lt. Tom Kaufmann or Lt. Frank Craven are taking the helm. Purl is a compact man with sharp features and a deceptively self-effacing manner. His words sound soft, but they don't bend. He sets the tone:

"They say that a busy house is a happy house. In a place where they don't do too much, a lot of times a fella will say, 'I don't need you. I got my 24 hours to do, and I can do it sitting in a corner.'

"That attitude's no good," Purl continues. "You have to have the guys working together. You have to have a feeling of 'you need me and I need you.' When there *is* a fire, you want to know that when you call a name out, that fella is more than willing to go right in there with you and help. That's how we operate here."

Lt. Kaufmann's crew has just polished off the last of the apple pie and cherry-vanilla ice cream. Tony Tassone says, "I hope we get a good garage fire now." The other men groan. "Damien Omen II" is winding up on Channel 5. The news is next. Then an alarm comes in — a brush fire in a vacant lot at 59th and Central Park. Without another word — or groan — they all put on their rubber coats, helmets, and boots. Bob von Vrasek, the engineer, gets behind the wheel. Tony and Jim O'Brien hop on the back. Kaufmann — usually laconic and playful — sits beside von Vrasek and stares grimly out the windshield. Joe Pawlak and Fred Martan hang on the sides.

As the truck pulls around the corner and Bob hits the air horn for the first time, Tony says to Jim, "Some kids probably had a little bonfire going. See, there's the kids there." A small band of shadows can be seen scurrying toward the railroad overpass and out of sight. An uprooted tree with a fiery orange splotch on its trunk crackles in a pile of twigs.

Fred Martan, a young candidate (rookie) doing a relief stint at Engine 88, takes the five-gallon hand pump off the running board and begins spraying. This pump alone can extinguish 100 square feet of free-burning timber, and in seconds it has made the orange splotch disappear. The men tramp around in a spectacular but harmless cloud of smoke until they're certain that all the fire is gone. Then they return to the truck and slowly drive back home. Elapsed time: 11 minutes. Taking off his coat and helmet to reveal a barrel chest and flowing gray hair, Jim O'Brien says to Tassone. "Hey, you mad at me, Tone? Huh?" Tony looks genuinely shocked. His face is pale under the slicked-back hair, and he hasn't been moving his bulky form around with the usual vigor. Tonight Tony hasn't been feeling well, a touch of the flu. But he isn't angry. "No-o-o-o, I'm not mad. Mad at you? Nawwww. Forget it, Jimmy. No way."

A firehouse as small as Engine 88 has no room for lingering animosity or misunderstanding. The bigger places may have the capacity for brooding, but in the 10 one-door, one-vehicle houses, a sorehead has no place to hide. This is a neighborhood sort of place.

Even the presence of Bob Atkins, one of the candidates hired by Mayor Byrne during the strike last winter, has not ruffled the collective composure, so far as anyone will admit. Atkins is the first black man permanently assigned to Engine 88, although, as one officer is quick to point out, "the colored" have worked relief stints regularly for years. The firehouse is slightly more desegregated than the neighborhood it protects, and the men seem proud of that fact. "We're all human here, all men," says Capt. Purl. "Color and nationality don't make a damn bit of difference."

At the big firehouses, the big problems intrude more directly. The men are immersed in leftover bitterness from last year's strike. Their nerves may be rubbed raw by frequent fires in neighborhoods where residents throw rocks and spit in their faces. Engine Company 88 can be a bit more relaxed.

This is the firehouse of our collective nostalgia. Kids on 60th Street look up to the men who hose down that big red truck every day. They want to be like them when they grow up. A few kids like that actually make it, but not always under circumstances they would have chosen. Mark Vianello, for example, is a candidate who came in when Mayor Byrne opened floodgates of opportunity for people who wanted to be firemen when they grew up. A lot of them were kids like Vianello, kids who wanted this work so badly they would even function as strikebreakers. Vianello, working at Engine 88 one day as a fill-in for a regular firefighter named Don Slee, obviously was performing his duties with an air of sincerity. A lot of the candidates have been attempting to stick together in the face of "regular" hostility. But Vianello says he would not cooperate with their organizing efforts. "Getting this job was a big break for me," he says. "As soon as I could, I joined the regular union. I have tried to do everything right. I come from the Hegewisch area, and I worked in the steel mills, and this is a helluva lot better." Every time Vianello gets a cup of coffee in the Engine 88 kitchen, he sees a bumper sticker plastered on one of the cabinets. "No More Handshakes," it says. "Contract Time 1979. Chicago Fire Fighters Union Local No. 2."

In a sense, there still are no handshakes. Although Engine Company 88 has not engaged in the sort of blatant and relentless ostracism of candidates prevalent at some firehouses (Capt. Purl sets the tone!), the joking and horseplay and insults seem to carom all around the rookies, never quite including them.

> *"I will be completely professional with those guys. I will teach them what I know. But I won't socialize with them. I don't think I could ever be close friends with one of them."*
> A veteran Engine 88 firefighter

But the men of Engine Company 88 are indulgent toward the innocent kids who live nearby. Even if they were leaving on a 5-11, the crews would pause to make sure all the Hot Wheels and trikes had cleared the driveway before they'd set the truck in motion. They will talk to knee-high aspiring firemen endlessly about hoses, ladders, sirens, and hatchets. Engine 88 has even become an official neighborhood recreation center. An old sign on the chain-link fence that surrounds the adjoining swimming pool and playlot says, *Mayor Richard J. Daley's Youth Foundation . . . Robert J. Quinn, Fire Commissioner.*

For the third time this morning, a boy from down the block approaches engineer Arnold Gacki, who is standing in the driveway hosing down the big red fire truck. Gacki usually faces the world with mocking eyes and a thin, ironic smile. But his expression opens up when he looks down at the boy. "Say, fireman, could you unroll the flag so I can sing 'The Star Spangled Banner' again?" the boy pleads. "Okay, Billy. I'll unroll it. Just this one more time, Billy." Gacki strolls to the furled banner on its pole beside the door. He pulls it free. Billy faces the flag stiffly with hand over heart. "O-oh saaay can

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Most of their bellies have long

Bob Muth prepares lunch at Engine Company 88. Each crew has its own supply of staples and condiments kept locked in cabinets.

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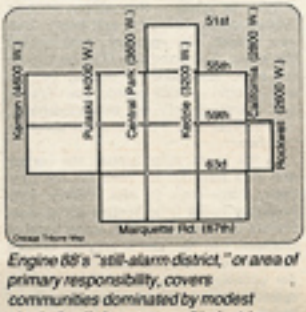
you seee." This is a daily ritual known well and tolerated kindly by all three shifts. Thanks to Billy, Engine Company 88 has the most serenaded flag south of Comiskey Park.

Engine Company 88 was set up long ago to serve a community where little of great note ever happens. Its "still alarm district" (realm of primary responsibility) is large but benign. It touches on parts of the communities known as West Eldston, West Lawn, Chicago Lawn, and Gage Park. These were cabbage farms when Chicago was young. Now they are precise, square blocks with small houses, decent parochial and halfway-decent public schools, churches, stores, factories, taverns, and offices. It would appear to be a still-alarm district with nothing alarming in it at all, but you can get arguments about that.

"It's changing," says Lt. Kaufmann, as he lounges in the dayroom with his men. Kaufmann is tall, dark, and likeable, but he, more than most, seems alert and prepared for some dark future



Engine 88's "still-alarm district," or area of primary responsibility, covers communities dominated by modest single-family homes, small industries, and neighborhood stores and shops concentrated along the arterial streets.

of frequent disaster. "It's coming," he says. "You got it right on the other side of Western — Latinos moving in. The Arabs are coming, too. You can see it workin' now. You're catchin' your garage fires. . . . When they start their furnace up in the winter, they don't bother to have it checked, or even clean it. Just touch that switch, and there it goes!"

Kaufmann's crew, more than any other, makes extensive use of the weights and punching bag in the basement. Kaufmann himself even drops by for workouts on his days off. "We're not doin' it to kick sand in people's faces — just to keep in shape," he explains, but Kaufmann and his men have the sort of biceps associated with linebackers, not health addicts. Their muscles seem on Red Alert. And when they discuss firehouse mascots they have known (Engine 88 has not had one for years), they linger longest over stories about attack dogs, not lovable dalmatians who ride on the ladder, rush headlong into raging fires, and rescue babies. Most of the men at Engine 88 have transferred there recently from other — less congenial — territories, and their reflexes haven't totally calmed down.

Jim O'Brien, for example, was amazed when the people of 60th Street held a block party last year and included the firemen. "They brought us *food*," he recalls. "They said, *Don't buy any food.*' I was surprised, because the places where I came from, the neighbors *hated* you. Well, they didn't *hate* you, but they'd see you sittin' around, and you could tell they were thinking, 'Oh, that sonofabitch, eatin' up my taxes.' But here, people stop by and say 'Hiya' and stop and talk and everything."

Food has a special meaning in a firehouse, because the men are confined to that building for 24 hours, and in any period of confinement, nourishment seems to loom in importance. Each of the three crews has a cook: Two were

since surrendered to the hefty lunches and dinners.

chosen because the men could truly prepare a fine meal. The other won the job because he detests washing dishes. Workouts in the basement have hardened many of the arms and shoulders at Engine Company 88, but most of the bellies have long since surrendered to the hefty lunches and dinners.

The kitchen has yellow cabinets and adjoins the day room, a clean but battered area with a long, Formica-topped table, classroom-style wooden chairs, and a couple of park benches along the wall. A 19-inch TV set looks down on the scene from a perch near the radiator. Right now, this back end of the firehouse smells good, because Bob Muth — a muscular and well-bellied crewman — is baking a meatloaf in the Kenmore oven.

A visitor drops in to chat, and Muth is happy to oblige. The other men have gone with the truck and Capt. Furl to the repair shop at 31st and Sacramento for repairs on a defective radio. With a cigaret dangling from his lips and glasses slipping down his nose, Muth bastes the meatloaf and begins to talk.

"I'm not the regular cook, just the substitute. Don Slee, the regular guy, is on 'daily' today." Muth goes on to explain that he has been stationed at Engine 88 only four months. Most of his 25 years in the department have been spent at busier houses on the Northwest Side; now he anticipates a smooth and safe transition into retirement, five years from now, when he turns 53.

"This place is all right," he says. "Whether you get one call or 100 calls a day, you're still needed for that one. People say this house is slow, but when somebody's house is burning in this neighborhood, then it's *fast*. When you're needed, you're *needed*.

"I like the job. The job's been good to me. I had a lot of good days, a lot of good years. During the strike, I was at Chicago and Laramie. That's when they said people with a lot of seniority could apply for a transfer. So I put in for something south. I'd been working northwest all my life and living south, so I figured, what the hell, I might as well give it a shot.

"I live around 54th and Menard now. I'm divorced, but I don't think my being a firefighter had anything to do with it. Let's face it, when you're incompatible with someone, what's the use of hanging in there?

"I went into companies years ago that would do 1,200 runs in three *months* — the number we do in a *year*. But to be honest with you, two-thirds of those runs were phonies, just a lot of bunk, phony boxes and stuff like that — false alarms. That's the sad part, because you go to a phony and you're out in the district, and something *real* is liable to happen."

The visitor wonders if Muth ever gets bored. "We've got this radio scanner that we bought with the $2-a-week house dues," he replies, "and we can turn it on and hear whatever's going on throughout the city. So, you can listen to the radio, drill a couple of times a day, do the housework in the morning, go on a couple of runs now and then, cook dinner or something. The day goes by.

"Whether you're here doing nothing or working in some other kind of job and doing nothing — the way I see it, you're still putting time in. You can't walk out of here and go to a picnic at 2 in the afternoon, or figure that at 6 o'clock you'll go on a beer bust. You're here for 24, and when that thing goes off up front, you're *gone*. Somebody has to be here, and *we're* here."

The thing that occasionally goes off up front is a telegraph key — an old chrome mechanism that probably would have been transformed into a lamp base, were it not still performing its function. It stands on a table by the officers' desk, punching combinations of red-ink dashes onto a paper tape that cascades into a wastebasket. The key seldom clacks out a code that would send Engine 88 into combat, but its noise invariably causes a break in the conversation, because you never know until the first couple of numbers have gone by.

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Amenities are bought with accumulated house dues.

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Each series of numbers corresponds to a "box alarm" plan that automatically designates the role of each fire company in any given situation. The numbers that summon Engine 88 are stamped on each firefighter's memory, but they also are recorded on file cards stored in a cabinet near the telegraph key. This is a full, city-wide set of cards, and the ones coded for the immediate vicinity bear a red-circled "88" near the top. Code cards for more distant areas show the "88" down near the bottom, indicating the company only would be called for an extra-alarm blaze or would cover a nearby district while *that* truck went to the scene. But generally speaking, Engine 88 stays within its own still-alarm district, because the district is hemmed in by the Belt Railway and Grand Trunk, each of which crosses several streets.

"There are certain key areas where we absolutely don't want to take companies out of their district," says 4th District Chief Jack McCarthy. "With these railroad crossings that they have on the South Side," he explains, "there might be a train going by for 15 minutes, and the truck wouldn't be able to go through. They don't have this problem on the North Side or downtown or in a lot of other big cities, but down here, we've got to keep somebody on this side of the tracks." Before Engine 88 would be called to an emergency on the far side of town, one imagines, all of Rogers Park would have to be going up in flames.

During Chicagofest, Engine 88 was pressed into service at Navy Pier, while another truck occupied its place in the firehouse. The Department wanted Engine 88 on standby at the festival because the Mack MB-600 has a short turning radius and could maneuver through the crowds. The men doused a few trashcan fires, but mostly they stood around and watched the appalling mass of humanity. "I was glad when that was over," one of them recalls. "All those kids staggering around half-stoned and throwing up and pissing out and screaming and yelling." After that experience, home never looked sweeter, he said.

The truck has returned from the repair shop, and Muth's coworkers are wandering back, drawn by the aroma of cooking meatloaf. Engineer Gacki pulls a copy of Architectural Digest from his back pocket and examines the lavish color photographs of bombe chests, credenzas, highboys, hutches, divans, Persian rugs, crystal goblets, tapestries, chaise longues, and sideboards. The only other publications read with regularity at Engine 88 are newspapers and the fire hydraulics texts studied by the candidates. A manual of such exquisite taste looks odd in this setting, so Gacki immediately tries to head off any of the kidding he might get. "I look at this so I can see the value of the furniture and stuff that we wreck," he says. "No, really, this comes in handy when I go to Carsen's warehouse sale. I've found some real bargains there."

Muth brings on the meal: meatloaf, potatoes, noodles, bread, and salad. Just then, a short, dark man in a business suit walks in with a suitcase, puts it on a bench, and opens it, revealing an array of merchandise. "I got a deal on four pipe wrenches that I'm closing out," the man says. No one responds, but Purl goes over and takes a look. "Five bucks for a set of screwdrivers?" says the man. Again, no answer. "I got dress gloves, calfskin. How about some sheep-lined gloves? Four bucks."

The salesman shrugs, finally, and closes his sample case. "Hey, that's a real working man's meal you got there," he says. Before walking out, he adds, "You won't find a better company of firemen than you guys. I'll tell you that right now."

"Who was that?" Muth asks. Everybody shakes his head. "Never saw him before," says Purl.

The men dig in. A year ago, they had to raise the daily meal money up a buck to $6 a day per person. "It's the economy, let's face it," says Muth, who bought the groceries at a Pulaski Road supermarket this morning. Almost every "amenity" not connected with firefighting must be bought from accumulated house dues. The fund today stands at $136, diminished a little by the purchase of some oven cleaner. "The department won't buy us a stove, but the chiefs damn well make sure that we keep it spotless," one man gripes.

Some neighbors (now forgotten in the collective short memory of these transferees) gave them the stove. Somebody else came up with the Montgomery Ward Signature Frostless refrigerator. Dues purchased the Cory hotplate, the NICRO Ready Brew coffeemaker, the Comfort-Aire air conditioner, the Zenith Chromacolor, the cooking utensils, even the sheets on the cots upstairs (one set has a

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Asked how he

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Donald Duck motif).

"Wasn't it Truck 30 that got its table from the back of an undertaker's parlor?" engineer Ed Waters asks the other members of Lt. Craven's crew one morning. "Yeah, now I remember," Waters continues. "It was a marble slab, and the firemen madea table out of it." Another firefighter turns up his nose, but the guy next to him says, "What's so bad about that? All they had to do was turn the slab over. Nobody lays on the bottom."

Stuffed with Muth's piece de resistance, plus an apple pie, the men of Purl's crew put on their rubber coats and take off for an inspection tour. Every now and then, Fire Prevention people send computer printouts to the firehouse so that the crews can update information compiled by downtown inspectors who had visited stores and institutions several weeks before. These excursions used to be an opportunity to renew acquaintance with neighborhood merchants, chew the fat awhile. But the liberalized transfer policy has brought a lot of new faces to Engine Company 88, and the economy has caused several businesses to fold or change hands. Even in a "stable" community such as this, you're dealing with strangers a good part of the time.

Gacki and Purl take the front seat. Muth and firefighter Joe Curran hang on the sides. Candidates Brian Corley and Mark Vianello stand on the back. This seems like a leisurely sojourn, but Gacki, for one, considers inspections paramount.

"Our primary responsibility is fire prevention," he says. "Then it's saving lives — rescue work. Third, it's saving property."

Gacki stops the truck across the street from an auto parts store on Kedzie, and the men, resembling a squadron of crows, approach the shop. While Muth and Curran examine the rear, Purl, Corley, and Vianello enter through the front door. The proprietor is talking on the phone. The store is dark, cluttered, and dusty. "How do you do, sir? We're here for a fire inspection," Purl says. The owner nods. Corley and Vianello inch their way through the mess and find the loft that houses the heating plant. "On structures like this here, we check to see that the smoke pipe is all right, not all holey, or anything like that." Purl explains to the proprietor, who has left the phone and now stands nervously at the captain's side. The men must press shoulder to shoulder in a narrow passageway between the stacks of tires and cartons of oil filters and radiator hoses.

"It's kind of crowded in here," says the proprietor apologetically. He keeps his eyes on Vianello, up there in the loft. "Well, you've got this pathway here, so we're going to say you're all right," Purl says.

And that is the prevailing attitude as they proceed to their other stops — gentle meetings with diffident strangers who need, and receive, a lot of reassurance from Capt. Purl. "Don't worry about that . . . it's okay . . . that's all right."

At a storefront heating-supply outlet, however, the rumpled, gray-haired man

would get out in case of fire, the man snarls: 'You wouldn't.'

Captain Bill Purl has private, though monastic, quarters in the front room upstairs. A seldom-used, highly polished pole is in background.

behind the counter doesn't seem impressed. He merely grunts when Purl introduces himself and asks to see the boiler. The man jerks his head toward the back room, and there Purl finds a passable furnace but an unacceptable stash of litter piled against the rear exit. He returns. "With that back door blocked, how the hell would you get out of here in case of fire?" Purl asks. Now the man's grunt sounds more like a snarl. "You wouldn't," he says. Purl frowns. "You better get it cleared, then." The man glares. "There isn't no place to go out there anyway," he says. "Just a tiny space between the buildings."

"You're *supposed* to have two entrances."

"Well, I'll clear it *out* then."

Purl heads for the one door that works. "We'll probably be back in three or four months to check," he says. "I'll mark you OK, though. But you take care of it."

The men of Engine Company 88 return to quarters. Their obligations to the computer printouts have been fulfilled for now. Other duties await.

A visitor on any given day might find the crew stretching and recoiling the hoses (a precaution against wear and kinking), washing the windows, scrubbing the wooden stairways with a stiff brush, practicing with the Mine Safety Appliance (a clumsy but effective breathing device with air tank and face mask), tying knots (another frequent drill), shining the two brass poles (infrequently used but still in place), swabbing the main room, hosing down the pumper's undercarriage (on "Underneath Day"). . . .

But visitors seldom do come by to see the work. "Years ago, they tell us, the neighbors were really friendly," says Lt. Craven. "They used to come down and shoot the breeze with the firemen. Now everything's changed; they aren't like that anymore. Oh, they'll say hello to you as they go by, but they used to hang around and shoot the bull with the firemen, bring cakes. We had one old-timer, I understand, who was here 37 years. He watched the kids grow up, and they invited him to their weddings."

At night, the firehouse feels more like a lonely outpost than a community institution. The men begin to yawn and stretch around 10 p.m. They used the last bit of their energy to watch "Benny Hill" on Channel 32 before they retire. "That's it," says Jim O'Brien. " 'Benny Hill' is gone." And in a moment, O'Brien is gone, too, upstairs in his cot, sound asleep. Soon, all of them leave — Lt. Kaufmann (to his separate but monastic quarters in the front room upstairs), engineer Bob von Vrasek, Tony Tassone, Fred Martan.

They leave Joe Pawlak, the youngest regular, to stand watch. He spends the three hours looking with disinterest at a couple of mindless films-made-for-TV.

Tony Tassone relieves him, announcing his arrival with groans and loud yawns. He still doesn't feel very well, so he stretches on the two park benches and stares at an even more mindless late movie.

Tassone must not sleep during this time. Somehow, he keeps his eyes half-open, and when the telegraph key sounds one of its infrequent clacks, his head moves sideways half an inch until the code numbers move on to another district far away, perhaps to a "busy" house, where the men fight off fires instead of slumber during the last 10 hours of their 24. ■