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Spotsylvania Fire, Rescue and Emergency Management Chief Jay Cullinan presents Janet Brooks with a burial flag during funeral services for her husband, Chief Norman Brooks Sr. At right is Brooks' daughter, Sue Carter.

Chief Norman Brooks: 'A hero among heroes'

BY CATHY DYSON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Norman Brooks Sr. always gave his best to Spotsylvania County, so his friends and neighbors—as well as those who fought fires with him for almost half a century—did the same for him on Tuesday.

More than 1,500 people, many representing fire departments, rescue squads and sheriff's offices in the Fredericksburg area and beyond, gathered for the fire chief's final send-off. Brooks, 65, and a native of Spotsylvania, died unexpectedly Feb. 13, after working 47 years as a volun-

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teer and career firefighter.

The Rev. Scott Quinn led the service, which started at Spotswood Baptist Church with a standing-room-only crowd. Almost half of those gathered were in uniform.

"I bet there's somebody

here from just about every jurisdiction in the state," said Lt. Tim Duchenev with Spotsylvania fire and rescue.

Quinn has been pastor for Brooks and his wife, Janet, for five years at Travelers Rest Baptist Church in Partlow, but he first met Norman Brooks about 30 years ago when the fireman already was a "living legend."

SEE BROOKS, A12



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Brooks' helmet and gear are on display at Spotswood Baptist Church, where his funeral service was held.



MIKE MORONES / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

A Spotsylvania fire tanker carrying Brooks' casket leads his funeral procession along Courthouse Road.



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The funeral procession for Brooks wound for miles along Courthouse Road, inspiring onlookers to stop and look.

BROOKS

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Quinn recalled how many times he heard the voice of the man then known as “Chief 2A” on the scanner at all hours of the day or night. The pastor couldn’t guess how many thousands of fire calls Brooks had answered or how many lives he’d saved during his years of service.

“But I do know this,” Quinn said. “Spotsylvania County is a better place to live and work because Chief Norman Douglas Brooks Sr. lovingly dedicated nearly 50 years of his life serving the citizens.”

Those citizens, and the men and women who protect them, pulled out all the stops for his funeral service. At Spotswood, two tower trucks from the Spotsylvania County Department of Fire, Rescue and Emergency Management had ladders raised and a garrison flag—38-feet wide by 20-feet tall—hung between them.

Another garrison flag, raised by tower trucks from Stafford County and Lake of the Woods, stood at Travelers Rest, where Brooks was buried.

His flag-draped casket was carried up a platform with six steps and lifted onto the top of Spotsylvania Tanker 1. In a gesture that symbolized the unity Brooks always advocated, six volunteers and six career firefighters shared duties as pallbearers.

Every intersection on the 11.3-mile stretch from Lafayette Boulevard to Partlow was blocked for the procession. Uniformed deputies stood beside their patrol cars, in salute, and at various points along the route, Spotsylvania trucks and ambulances that

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—REV. SCOTT QUINN

weren’t in the procession were parked, their teams at attention.

Other people stood in shopping center parking lots in the Four Mile Fork area or in front of offices at Spotsylvania Courthouse, waving flags, recording video with their phones or placing hands over their hearts. Construction workers on Lafayette Boulevard stopped for a moment, hard hats in hand, and near Marshall Park, people stood on front porches to watch the procession.

It included dozens of fire trucks and rescue squads, tow trucks with lights flashing and motorcycles operated by police and civilians. Eight chartered buses carried family members and Spotsylvania first responders from Spotswood to the graveside service.

No other westbound traffic was allowed on State Route 208 as the procession moved through the county.

Speakers at the funeral service talked about the impact Brooks had on so many others. Johnny Leach, past deputy chief at Chancellor Volunteer Fire and Rescue, described the family firefighters have, both at home and at their stations.

“Chief Brooks was the father to so many,” Leach said.



PHOTOS BY PETER CIHELKA / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Funeral services are held for Chief Norman Brooks Sr. at Spotswood Baptist Church.



Family members watch as Brooks’ casket is carried onto a tanker truck by career and volunteer firefighters.

“He never met a stranger.”

Spotsylvania Sheriff Roger Harris said Brooks never stopped smiling, giving or putting his family first, and “part of that family is the sea of blue you see today.” He always took care of everyone on a fire scene, whether he was directing the effort or making sure those who’d been working so hard got enough to eat and drink.

“He was a hero among heroes,” Harris said. “There’s a hole in everyone’s heart, and it will always be there.”

Chief Jay Cullinan described Brooks and his fun-loving nature—the way he reminded those doing serious work that it was OK to have a good time. “He was a character and a man of character,” the chief said.

Cullinan said Brooks also joked that when his time came, he was going to line his

coffin with lead or rig some kind of device to create a knocking noise from inside. At that point, Cullinan looked down from the pulpit, around the coffin, just in case Brooks had pulled one of his practical jokes.

Quinn remembered being on the receiving end of those gags. When he was a rookie firefighter, Brooks once told Quinn “to go ask Thomas [Oesterheld] to get the sky hooks for you.”

Some in the audience laughed, and Quinn let the rest of the crowd in on the joke. There’s no such thing as sky hooks in fire service, just like there’s no frequency grease for radios or air brake fluid for tankers.

Brooks loved a good belly laugh, Quinn said, recalling the days he and other volunteers, such as Lewis Curtis, organized the ugliest women

beauty contests as part of the annual firemen’s carnival. Brooks won the prize several times.

“Norman made for one ugly woman, didn’t he?” Quinn asked the laughing audience. “He was a great person to be around, but when the tones went out, Norman’s serious side always took over because peoples’ lives were at stake.”

Brooks’ fellow firefighters surrounded his family at church and at the graveside. His son said how grateful his father would be for the outpouring of support.

“I know he’s smiling down on us,” said Norman Brooks Jr.

Still, the symbolism that marked the ceremony created emotional moments for those left behind. Family members sobbed at the tolling of the bell ceremony, when five dings—marked by pauses between each of three sets—marked the end of watch for Chief Brooks.

At the graveside service, a bugler played “Taps” and Brooks’ widow clutched the folded flag from her husband’s casket. The ultimate symbol of loss came next, when she received his fire helmet.

Earlier, speakers mentioned they could picture Brooks in heaven, at a fully stocked fire house or comparing notes about who had the shiniest fire truck. People smiled then, but the graveside presentation of his helmet brought the realization that Chief Norman Douglas Brooks Sr. would never fight another fire in Spotsylvania County.

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