

History of the Rank Structure in Fairfax County

In 1949, the ten original firefighters were hired to staff ten of the fourteen fire stations. In 1952, four more firefighters were hired, bringing one firefighter to each station. The volunteer chiefs wanted to classify these personnel as custodians, but the Board of Supervisors classified them as Caretakers. This title would last until 1956 when more personnel were hired.

In 1954, twenty-four-hour coverage Monday through Friday was needed, and the personnel rotated working days and nights.

In 1956, a second paid firefighter was hired and assigned to each fire station. The most senior firefighter at each station was classified as Fire Engineer II, and the less senior was classified as Fire Engineer I. This brought the total number of personnel to thirty-four field personnel. Between 1960 and 1962, staffing was increased to three personnel per fire station. Although not technically a shift leader in the job description, the Engineer II adopted the role as more personnel were hired. If the Engineer II was riding as the officer on the apparatus, it was not uncommon for volunteer officers to come into the station and bump the Engineer II and take his riding position.

The paid firefighters were under the control of the volunteer chief at their respective stations. However, technically, being Fairfax County employees, they worked for the Board of Supervisors (BOS) with no upper management between the BOS and the firefighters.

In September 1963, Willis Burton became the first paid Fire Chief of Fairfax County Fire & Rescue Services; his title was Fire Administrator. Chief Burton brought many changes to the department in his seven-year tenure until he retired in 1971. Two of his most significant accomplishments were getting all the paid staff under one work schedule and implementing the rank system.

By establishing the rank structure, Chief Burton brought responsibility and accountability under the authority of one paid fire chief, not each volunteer fire chief.

The following changes of the new rank structure were gathered from the notes of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors (BOS) dated August 2, 1967. The BOS notes also contained the pay scale and reclassification of ancillary job descriptions but were not included in this article. The rank structure in the volunteer corps included the rank of Engineer I & II. The paid firefighters wanted a separate rank from the volunteer system. Working with the Paid Fireman's Association, Chief Burton requested from the BOS the reclassification of Engineer I & II to Firefighter and Technician.

- Firemen Engineer I was at an S-17B pay grade. They would be retitled as Firefighters.

- Firemen Engineer II, shift leader/driver, would be reclassified as Fire Technician at a pay grade of S-19.
- A new classification, paid Fire Lieutenant, was created at an S-21 pay grade for each fire station. The lieutenant would work days, and technicians would be shift leaders.
- Fire stations with ten or fifteen personnel would retain the lieutenant position but have a new paid Fire Captain classification at a pay grade of S-23. The captain would be on daywork, the lieutenant would be assigned to one of the shifts, and technicians would be shift leaders on the other two shifts.
- Fire stations with over fifteen personnel will be staffed with one captain and two lieutenants. The captain worked day work, and the two lieutenants and a technician would be shift leaders.

In 1968, staffing was increased in all nineteen stations to include 220 field personnel, a fire chief, a deputy fire chief, two training officers, seven captains, twelve lieutenants, thirty-eight technicians, and 140 firefighters.

Before 1967, the volunteer fire chief at each station had almost total authority and control over the paid firefighters in their station. The volunteer fire chief had to approve hiring each firefighter in their station and could fire an employee at their discretion. This changed when the BOS hired Chief Burton as the Fire Director. All paid firefighters now fell under the command and authority of the paid chief, removing the volunteer fire chief from this responsibility.

To effectively run the department, the fire chief needed another level of authority to keep the span of control manageable. On a map, the county was split in half, horizontally. Fire stations above the dividing line in the upper part of the county were North Zone 1, and stations below the line were South Zone 2. The battalion chief's position was created called Zone Administrators who worked days only. They were called Unit 11 (North) and Unit 21 (South) on the radio.

In December 1971, the first FFII (Technician) test was given. This pilot program set the standard for all future FFII (Technician) tests. By August 1972, all vacant FFII positions were filled, and an FFII was assigned to each engine company (wagon) and truck company. The only qualification for being able to take this test was to be a firefighter for two years.

The job description and name for the technician's position changed over the years. The first was Engineer II, the senior firefighter whose supervisor was the volunteer chief. With the increase in staffing in 1967, the title was changed to technician. The technician was the apparatus driver and/or shift leader. With a rank structure in place, the technician reported

to either a captain or lieutenant. After the first promotional test in 1971, the title was changed to Firefighter II.

The fire chief realized there was a need for an officer on every shift, and the fire sergeant position was created in August/September 1972. The fire sergeant would replace the technician shift leaders. If a station had a truck company, an additional sergeant would be assigned to ride as the truck officer. The only qualification for taking this test was to be a FFII/Technician for two years.

Emergency care advancements came to Virginia in 1971 with the implementation of the Basic Life Support (BLS) certification program. In 1973, Fairfax County began teaching BLS, and it began with the 29th Recruit School. In July 1974, the first BLS Technician positions were created. The first positions were filled by interested field personnel without a test being given.

1976, the department implemented an advanced life support (ALS) program. Firefighters were trained as cardiac care technicians (CCT), and the FY76 budget approved a plan to place ten medic units in service.

For training purposes, the first medic unit to go into service was Medic-18. During their internship, all CCTs had to ride on Medic-18 (daytime only) with a doctor or nurse to be approved as certified CCTs. Medic 25 was the first 24/7 medic unit placed in service in 1977. By the end of 1978, four medic units would be in service. In July 1976, ALS-certified acting lieutenants and sergeants' positions were created and filled to staff the four med units. Over two years later, in December 1978, these acting positions became permanent. The medic unit would be staffed with a Medic Lieutenant, Medic Sergeant, and Medic Technician.

Having non-certified ALS suppression officers evaluate these ALS providers created a problem, and the EMS captain and EMS battalion chief ranks were created sometime in the 1980s.

In 1982/83, the county created the Hazardous Materials and Technical Rescue programs. In the beginning, this specialized training was not compensated for. The county realized permanent assignments to the rescue company needed to be created to maintain qualified personnel.

On May 31, 1983, a minimum staffing of three personnel was established for all front-line apparatus, including rescue companies. Although each frontline apparatus would have an officer, driver, and firefighter assigned when the officer was off duty, the FFII/Technician would act in their place.

The apparatus FFIIIs would be reclassified back to the Technician title again. All present FFIIIs would be called technicians. This title change had one glitch: an FFII driver's test had been given the year before, and the established list had one more year until it was abolished. Any promotions from the FFII list would be considered FFII promotions and then would be changed to technicians.

In 1983, all rescue companies were staffed with a sergeant, a technician (driver), and one firefighter. Hazmat qualified are assigned to Rescues 1, 11, and 26. The Technical Rescue program became fully operational in 1984, and Rescue Companies 14, 18, and 21 were staffed with TROT personnel.

The station captain position was no longer a day job, and in May 1984, all station captains were assigned to shift work across all three shifts. This began when the 4/4/4 work schedule was eliminated, and the twenty-four-hour shift was implemented.

The Career Development program was implemented in 1987. Hazmat technicians were promoted to fill the firefighter positions on Rescues 1, 11, and 26, and TROT Technicians were promoted to fill the firefighter positions at 14, 18, and 21. The rank of Master Firefighter was created. This rank would be the training instructor for probationary firefighters and the fill-in officer on truck companies and non-specialty Rescue Squads.

In the 1990s, rank classification changed the terminology for sergeants, lieutenants, and captains. The rank of sergeant did not exist anywhere in the Northern Virginia fire departments except in Fairfax County. The Sergeants were retitled to Lieutenant, Lieutenants were retitled Captain I, and Captains were retitled Captain II.

In the 2020s, the rank of Captain I and Captain II blended into a retitled Captain, and the rank of Master Technician was eliminated.

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