



# The Chicago Civil Defense Fire & Rescue Service

By Carl Fox, Lt. (Ret) Niles Fire Department

**Preface:** I was a member of the CD unit from its inception in 1957 until 1961. Therefore, if I have omitted any names or events that occurred after this period, I apologize.

The Chicago Civil Defense Fire and Rescue Service was born on a cold, blustery October afternoon in 1957 at a gathering of devoted fire fans in a lot adjacent to the quarters of Engine 14 on west Chicago Avenue. Members of the 5-11 Fire Fans Club and the Chicago Fire Fans Assn. (CFFA) had been summoned to a meeting to discuss the possibility of responding to fires and emergencies with six heavy-duty rescue trucks, which had been sitting idle at various city garages.

Vehicle maintenance proved to be an obstacle at the beginning. It was winter and inside and outside painting was necessary. We still did not have any permanent quarters so we took the vehicles to the Department Shops at 31st and Sacramento where we thought we could use inside facilities. However, because of union objections we ended up doing our work on the outside, even though this was sometimes done during extremely cold, snowy weather. This made the drying of paint very slow and tacky.

We had our baptism under fire on New Years Day 1958, the first day of official service, with one fully equipped and operable rig, at an extra alarm fire in an eight story cold storage



THE SIX FULLY EQUIPPED UNITS OF THE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE

CFD Photo: 1957 Annual Report

One of the blue and white vehicles was parked in the lot and on examination we were amazed at the amount of equipment that was stored inside and on top. Charles "Jimmy" Johnson, a devoted fire fan and prominent businessman, told us that the city had six of these trucks. He said that Fire Commissioner Robert J. Quinn, also the city's civil defense director, and Mayor Richard J. Daley, wanted to have an auxiliary trained force of volunteers to operate these vehicles and equipment to augment the fire department at fires and major disasters. Needless to say, the announcement was met with great enthusiasm from the assembled fans. It was decided at that time that we would meet twice a week, Tuesdays for training and Saturdays for vehicle maintenance and rehab.

Our training sessions were started at the old fire department drill school, on Vernon Park Place, under the direction of fire department personnel. This included first aid, hose and ladder evolutions and practice with the power tools carried on the rigs, some of which, even the department did not carry. We had portable generators, chain saws, debris buckets and, most importantly, a seven-ton winch on the front bumper of each vehicle. After the first few sessions, most of the members remaining were from the 5-11 Club along with a few CFFA members.

warehouse at 54 E. Hubbard Street. It was a bitter cold day, and, as I recall, members wore only their own fire coats, boots and headgear. One of the main functions that day was to haul 50 lb. bags of salt to adjacent buildings and surrounding areas so that the firefighters would not fall and become injured. Being a slow news day, this spectacular fire was televised nationally and we received a million dollars worth of publicity. Inquiries began pouring in from throughout the country about this newly formed organization.

As we grew the rolling stock of the unit also grew. In addition to the six heavy duty vehicles, which had fire department radio signatures of 4-7-1 through 4-7-6, with Chief Johnson's ID of 4-7-7-, two new trucks were placed in service in 1960, an air compressor truck and a light wagon built on a used telephone company truck. Over 390 tools of all kinds were carried on the HD apparatus. These consisted of gasoline powered chain saws, and inhalator, metal cutting saws and roto-hammers for breaching brick walls. We even had a marine unit, so to speak, with the addition of a 16-foot jet powered boat donated by a local boat dealer. This boat sported a deck gun and hose, powered by a powerful jet